

AURA OF magic

the
UNEXPECTED
MAGIC
SERIES

"Known for her masterful talent for writing whimsy,
humor and mayhem, Rice gives the reader a delightful
romantic adventure in . . . her Unexpected Magic series"
—Joan Hammond, *RTE Reviewer 4 1/2 stars*

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

PATRICIA
RICE

AURA OF MAGIC

UNEXPECTED MAGIC BOOK FOUR

PATRICIA RICE



Contents

Author's Note	
Get A Free Patricia Rice Book	
Acknowledgments	
Chapter 1	
Chapter 2	
Chapter 3	
Chapter 4	
Chapter 5	
Chapter 6	
Chapter 7	
Chapter 8	
Chapter 9	
Chapter 10	
Chapter 11	
Chapter 12	
Chapter 13	
Chapter 14	
Chapter 15	
Chapter 16	
Chapter 17	
Chapter 18	
Chapter 19	
Chapter 20	
Chapter 21	
Chapter 22	
Chapter 23	
Chapter 24	
Chapter 25	
Chapter 26	
Chapter 27	
Chapter 28	
Chapter 29	
Chapter 30	
Chapter 31	
Chemistry of Magic	
Chemistry of Magic EXCERPT	
Get A Free Patricia Rice Book	
About the Author	
About Book View Café	

Patricia Rice

Copyright ©2017 Patricia Rice

First Publication Book View Cafe, 2017

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book, or portion thereof, in any form.

This is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real locales are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Published by Rice Enterprises, Dana Point, CA, an affiliate of Book View Café Publishing Cooperative

Cover design by Kim Killion

Book View Café Publishing Cooperative

P.O. Box 1624, Cedar Crest, NM 87008-1624

<http://bookviewcafe.com>

978-161138-661-5 ebook

978-161138-662-2 POD

Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

Please purchase only authorized electronic editions, and do not participate in or encourage electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

Thank You.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Virtual hugs and kisses to my faithful readers, without whom I wouldn't be having so much fun writing this series!

To my new readers: Don't worry. You needn't have read any of the other volumes to enjoy this one. Secondary characters may be recurring, but each story and couple stands alone. The only problem you might encounter is if you're a stickler for title usage and don't realize Lady Aster is the daughter of an earl and thus entitled to be called Lady Aster instead of Lady Theophilus.

As in most of my Magic books, the Malcolm gifts I describe often have some scientific basis. In this book, I give my heroine the ability to see auras. I think most of us know that people with migraines often complain of seeing auras, so scientists have concluded they are a neurological flaw. But those of us who believe in the human spirit consider auras a reflection of what's inside us. My intent isn't to prove or disprove either theory. This is my story, and Brigid sees what she sees. The reader is free to reach their own conclusions.

GET A FREE PATRICIA RICE BOOK

Would you like to know when my next book is available? I occasionally send newsletters with details on new releases, special offers and other bits of news. If you sign up for the mailing list I'll send you a free Patricia Rice novel.



To download your free book, [click here](#).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Even after all these years, I cannot give birth to a book without a tribe to push it out into the world. I am blessed by the circle of friends and amazing talent of Book View Café, a cooperative of authors who have survived the worst the publishing industry can fling at them, and who still emerged triumphant. In particular, I thank Mindy Klasky, Sherwood Smith, and Diana Pharaoh Francis for their words of wisdom on the sprawling draft they reined in and helped tame. The tech people behind the scenes deserve halos for their steadfast ability to make the internet perform like a tame beast instead of swallowing us alive.

And as always, my love and appreciation to my husband, who has learned all the techie requirements of book production that I cannot fathom. But anyone who can learn to live with a writer can conquer whole new worlds!

Without readers, my books would merely be megabytes in my computer. From me, from all authors everywhere, thank you for reading!

CHAPTER 1

SNARLING in a fit of undignified temper, Pascoe Ives whacked his walking stick against an inoffensive hedge. A terrified rabbit leapt from its hiding place.

Imagining swinging the ebony cane at His Majesty's ministers, forcing them to leap like frightened conies, defused the worst of his frustration. Throwing back his shoulders, Pascoe relaxed his grip on the cane's crested gold handle—a crest that didn't belong to him, which was part of the whole problem. Without a title to wield, he was at the king's mercy.

As if to counter his foul mood, the gold knob reflected the fading rays of the sun on what would have been a beautiful day to escape to Brighton.

He had promised the children and servants a visit to the shore, if only in vague hope of restoring sanity in a household where none existed. The meeting with the king's cabinet shattered any illusion that he could escape the life he'd carved for himself—a life that hadn't included family until he'd arrogantly acquired one under the assumption that a wife would tend the family hearth.

As he approached his townhome, he noted a battered ostrich plume brushing the railing of his kitchen stairs. His heart stuttered and tripped. Lily always forgot her keys. She had used to sit on the step and read. . . . But this was not the modest cottage he'd once shared with his late wife.

Even thinking of Lily at this moment was a denial of the dilemma sitting on his doorstep. With a sigh, Pascoe stopped at the rail. Wearing her best traveling costume, the young nanny he'd recently hired wept on his kitchen stairs. Her tears ground all pretense of normalcy into grains of sand, the sand he would not be seeing anytime soon.

Did Brighton have sand? Traveling on official duties, he'd only seen the insides of inns, taverns, and cavernous palace chambers—never the coastline.

"What is it the children have done now?" he asked in weariness. "Vanished from the nursery? You knew they would not speak when I hired you."

Startled, the nanny hastily wiped at her eyes with a handkerchief. "Oh sir, I *tried*. I truly did."

“Yes, yes, they all do.” He impatiently tapped his stick against the stone steps. “Did they leave snakes beneath your pillow? Climb up a chimney? Or simply find a way to the roof?” His adorably precocious toddlers had done all that and more in the past.

More tears poured as she stood to face him. He towered uncomfortably over her and had to lean over to listen to her whispers. “They hate me, sir. They can hear me, I know they can, but they do nothing I say unless they wish to do so.”

Nothing he hadn’t heard a hundred times before. Impatiently, he swung his stick against the step. “Dealing with bright children requires a backbone.”

She stiffened said backbone. “Sir, I could not forgive myself it they truly vanished or got themselves in trouble, while I thought them safe and did nothing. I have no way at all of knowing where they are or what they are doing. They are so *silent*.”

“Until they’re not,” he added, knowing just exactly how loud they could be when they chose. “It’s a blamed inconvenient time to leave.”

“They’ll be fine with you, sir,” she said bravely. “They are eager to go to Brighton. It’s just me they find offensive. I cannot teach them if they will not listen. They are not *bad* children, sir.”

“They are undisciplined brats,” Pascoe growled. But there was no point in arguing. He’d tried that with the first few nursemaids, nannies, and governesses who had left, usually in tears. This one, at least, had lasted until he returned home.

She visibly steeled herself and raised her chin. “What they need is a mother, sir, a mother who can be there when you are not, who can hug them if they are frightened, and read them stories until they sleep, someone they know will always be there for them.”

They’d had a mother like that for two years. She’d died. Pascoe didn’t know when in hell he’d have time to hunt for another. If he couldn’t hire a reliable nanny, it wasn’t likely he could find a saint who would endure his absences and his children’s eccentricities, a sweet, maternal sort who would love and nurture instead of fleeing in fury and tears. Or become ill and die, he conceded blackly.

“Did Mrs. Black give you the reference I left on my desk?” he asked in resignation. He’d had hopes for this nanny. She was highly experienced, educated, intelligent, and his nephew’s wife had said her astrological chart was propitious, whatever that meant.

But he always prepared a reference for the servants working with the twins before he left town—which he would be doing shortly, again, and not for sunny Brighton but for the gray wilds of the north. He didn’t want to be responsible for women starving in the streets because his children drove them there.

“Oh, yes, yes, she did, thank you so very much, sir.” She curtsied

her relief.

He left her waiting for whatever transportation she was expecting and stomped up the steps, letting himself in the unlatched front door. The footman was nowhere in sight.

His beautiful—usually mute—four-year-old twins, however, bounced down the stairs crying, “Papa, Papa, see new mama now?”

He nearly keeled over in shock—his nursemaid-terrorizing urchins had just miraculously learned to speak? And the first words out of their mouths were that they wanted a *mother*?

How could he tell them that finding a saint did not fit into his schedule?



BRIGHID DARROW, Countess of Carstairs, paced her dimly-lit chamber with angry taps of her heels against the stone. Her room in this medieval castle where she'd retired herself had only narrow slits for windows, but it was well paneled and appointed. The company was congenial. Her fury wasn't at her newly-chosen home.

She railed at the fates, at the stupidity of men—and her thick-skulled younger brother in particular. “If you incite rebellion, the king will send armies, just as he did to Wales a few weeks ago. Hundreds died! Homes and businesses were destroyed,” she cried in fear and exasperation.

Bony hands clasped together, the dunderhead rested his elbows on his knees, all lanky limbs and angry youth. “Why would the king send armies to a solitary mine in the north country? He doesn't even know we exist. We must establish our position *now*, before Carstairs becomes entrenched in his mismanagement.”

Carstairs. She seethed at the title she bore. She had married too young to recognize that the whole wretched family was rotten to the core. Or more correctly, too mush-minded, whiskey-pickled stupid to rot.

She had married thinking she would have children of her own, children who would become *responsible* earls and leaders. She had failed. She had failed in so many ways. . .

She took a deep breath and tried to keep the tremor from her voice. “You are all I have, Fin. Please, do not do this, for my sake. It's sedition.”

He looked up, his big green eyes so like their grandfather's that she nearly wept. “Sometimes, sis, the cause is greater than the individual. This is one of those times. If you cannot help, I will find other ways.”

The pain of it was that she understood, from deep down inside

her, in the core of integrity that their grandparents had molded. She *knew* the people of the village were more important than the new earl's laziness.

But the more recent memory of poor Meg and her babe and the appalling aftermath slammed her shields back in place. "The village drove me out," she said, revealing the very large crack in her heart, the one that needed time to heal. "They called me *witch*. Witch! Can you imagine how it feels, after all these years of coming to their aid, that for no explicable reason, they call me names and reject me? How can I possibly help?"

She wanted to weep, but her tears had frozen long ago.

He nodded in resignation and stood up. "I don't know what happened, Bridey, I'm sorry. I just assume they needed someone to blame, and you were closest. But they're changing, Bridey, they have to. We'll be shutting down the mine soon. People will go hungry. *Hungrier.*"

"I fail to see what I can do," she said, coldly drawing herself up straight and stiff as any board, arming herself with indifference. She might be lean, but she was as large-boned as her brother, and only a few inches shorter—a descendant of warriors just as he was. She'd never been the warm and cuddly sort. Intimidation came naturally to her. It had served her well as countess and even better in exile.

"You could reason with Carstairs," he argued. "You're still a bloody countess. You have rights."

"No, I don't," she said emphatically. "Women have no rights whatsoever. It would break my heart," she continued, "but I could find someone to help you go to the Americas if you wished. I can find someone to help you set up as an engineer *anywhere*. I will *not* help you get yourself killed."

"Power and wealth have made you as cold as all the Carstairs," he said bitterly. "The warm-hearted sister I once knew would never have turned her back on the people who worshipped her, no matter what the circumstance."

"Aye, and I'm the cold-hearted witch they made of me," she agreed callously. "I gave them my youth, my allegiance, my gifts. I provided for you and grandda. And now that I have no power or wealth, you turn your backs on me. So be it."

"I still love you, Bridey. I just don't agree with you. I've left some of grandda's carrier pigeons on the roof. Keep them fed, please." Sadly, he took his hat in hand and let himself out.

At least the pigeons meant that he wished to hear from her. Tears wet her eyes, but she didn't allow them to fall. She'd cried herself to sleep that first year of her marriage at the tender age of sixteen. She'd cried when the babies of the village had died, and she'd been helpless

to save them. She'd cried when she'd lost the only baby she'd ever conceived and nearly lost her life in the process.

But she hadn't wasted all her time weeping. She'd lived and learned and educated herself in all manner of subjects—specializing in female knowledge since every man she'd known except her grandfather had scorned the intelligence and abilities of women, and their needs.

Men could have their weapons and wars and riots. They could have their alcohol and tobacco and kill themselves as they would and good riddance to them.

She would start a school and teach women so they could save the children men so carelessly left behind. *That* was her future. She simply needed to start looking for funds.

After Fin left and before she could send for tea to settle her rattled nerves, she heard a light tap at her door. Puzzled that it seemed to come from the lower part of the panel—since when had the household contained midgets?—she opened her senses just enough to be certain it was safe. She painfully remembered when she'd been rendered helpless through careless use of her gift. She didn't use it so casually now. In this ancient castle full of spirits, she feared her own senses.

Seeing nothing dreadful emanating through the panel, she opened the door a crack and peered down.

Surrounded in vibrant white light, two unfamiliar curly-haired toddlers with identical sky-blue eyes peered up at her. "Are you our new mama?"

Before she could gasp, or study this fascinating apparition, a well-built city gentleman in polished boots and expensively-tailored riding attire raced up the stairs shouting "Emma, Edward, where the devil. . .?" He halted abruptly at sight of the children—and her.

Bridey stared. He stared back. The moment froze in time.

He had the most terrifyingly dramatic aura she had ever seen in her life. Every shade of clear red pulsed around him, with almost no other color infringing on that dominant willpower. She staggered backward, nearly blinded, and slammed her inner vision shut to concentrate on his less-dangerous outward appearance.

The affected monocle of a London dandy dangled from his lapel. A half dozen watch fobs hung at his waist, and he carried the kind of elaborate ebony walking stick exquisites of a prior generation once sported. Had he been less tall and muscled—or had she not seen his dangerous aura—she would have dismissed him as an absurd man-milliner.

But a second glance revealed that his breeches conformed to brawny thighs, and his boots detailed the powerful calves of an

experienced horseman. His sharply carved visage displayed all male arrogance, of course—and a strong look of Ives. Her cousin Aster had married into that family, although Aster's husband, Lord Theo, was a fairly restrained specimen. This Ives. . . she ripped her gaze from the appreciative look in his dark eyes to study the toddlers at their feet.

They eagerly awaited her answer to their puzzling question. Could it be connected to the faint violet streak she'd glimpsed in their auras? Blue hues often indicated intuition. Violet could mean a sensitivity almost as strong as most Malcolms possessed. Of course, it was said the current Ives family had descended from Lady Ninian Malcolm. . .

A bright pink light had surrounded father and children—not of them but *around* them.

"Please, are you our new mama?" the boy—Edward?—asked again.

Her reading of auras could be wrong, and intuition was meaningless on a practical basis. Bridey swallowed hard and called up her frozen shield.

Whoever they might be, this trio were irrelevant to everything she intended to make of her life now that she was finally free of attachments. She had no idea why they were in Wystan, an outpost of female power where Malcolm women gave birth, or why they had come to *her* door, but she would not welcome them.

"Of course I am not your mother," she said frostily. "Why are they not in the nursery?" she demanded of the gentleman.

He had appeared harried and concerned as he'd raced after the children. Obviously having recovered his equilibrium, he raised his monocle now and examined her in worldly amusement, before taking his toddlers by their plump little fists. "Excuse us for disturbing you, my lady. Come along, children, have your nannies ever told you about the Frost Queen? We will find some nice lady to tell you a story."

"But mama says she's our *new* mama," the little girl protested, dragging her feet as she was led away.

"You need a mother who laughs and likes children and tells you stories," he admonished. "Frost Queens turn children into icicles."

"Children cannot be icicles, can they?" the little boy asked earnestly as the twins stomped for the stairs, still unhappy.

"My, you two are chatty today." The gentleman cast a puzzled glance back at Bridey.

She shut the door, refusing to give in to curiosity. *Mama says she's our new mama?* They were children, that was all.

Studying the auras of strangers was a survival technique she should consider eliminating. Knowing a person that intimately on first glance was an invasion of their privacy and a shock to her system. She

was safe here. Malcolm women would never allow dangerous strangers into their home.

Well, Wystan actually belonged to Duncan Ives, the Marquess of Ashford, these days, but many of his family were Malcolm descendants, including the marquess. So they were all one big family, more or less.

Frost Queen, indeed! Where did he gather the audacity to insult her that way? If this was one of Lord Theo's brothers, and they thought they were free to come and go here, she might have to rethink making this her home.

Setting her mouth in determination, she swept down the corridor in search of Lady Aster. As sister-in-law to the marquess, her cousin had invited her here, knowing Bridey's situation. Aster would know the name of the newcomer.



SO MUCH FOR hoping that his family's doddering old castle in Northumberland might harbor a few motherly ladies who would look after the twins while he journeyed north. Pascoe shivered at the encounter with the icy specter haunting the women's floor of the old castle.

The auburn-haired Frost Queen had been much too vibrant to be a ghost—intimidatingly lovely, elegantly dressed, and probably a peeress, which would explain the arrogance. The Malcolm ladies generally married well.

But the shock of the children actually *talking* again—and to a woman who had clearly not encouraged their confidences—had left him off balance. Since that one demand in London after driving off their nanny, they'd not said another word, despite the opportunity provided by the endless journey up here. He'd been wondering if he'd hallucinated their earlier speech—until now.

Why now? Why *her*? Would any lady they encountered encourage their fantasy? *Servants* obviously didn't drive their need to speak.

He wanted his children to be normal and happy and that required communication. *Why would they not speak when it was just him?*

The housekeeper finally appeared down the hall and led them to the upstairs nursery before Pascoe resorted to pounding on doors.

"We don't have any babes in residence at the moment," the stout older woman explained, unlocking a large chamber set up for a variety of children. "The two Marys usually act as nursemaids when we have infants in residence. One will be up directly."

Thank all that was holy. Now, if only he could accomplish his task before the twins drove off every servant in the house. . .

“Thank you,” he said gravely, watching as his offspring explored the long room. Wordlessly, without even looking to him for permission, they dragged two small beds together and bounced on them while studying the shelves of toys.

“Don’t talk much, do they?” the housekeeper asked.

“Generally, not at all. They laugh, they cry, they shriek, but until today”—or the other evening, he mentally amended—“they have never spoken a complete sentence.”

That the only sentences they had completed referred to mothers, apparently plural, was a mystery he should ponder, if he were not so buried in urgent duties. Which brought him back to another task. Escorting the children here had taken more time than he should have. He needed to hurry.

“Where is Lord Theo?” he asked as a young nursemaid arrived at the top of the back stairs. She bobbed a curtsy and turned to the children.

“His lordship is at the top of the tower,” the housekeeper said with a hint of disapproval. “When he is not with his lady, he is studying the stars.”

This was the north country in June. Pascoe didn’t think there would be stars out for hours. But he understood the need to hide far from all the feminine energy inundating the ancient tower.

He watched as the nursemaid pulled an old book off the shelf and offered it to the children. Servants generally could not read, but anyone working with the Malcolms for long had a modicum of education. He relaxed as the twins obediently settled into tiny rocking chairs.

As their nanny had said—they really were good children. Except when they weren’t.

He hurried up the stairs the housekeeper pointed out. After a long journey of bouncing children, helpless servants, and the tedium of dust, mud, rain, and heat, he needed male company and masculine pursuits.

Although Theo was his nephew by society’s definition, Pascoe was only a few years older. They’d grown up together in the same nursery, if not the same schools. Eton did not accept illegitimate sons, no matter how high born.

Despite being raised in the Ives household with all the privileges of the legitimate heirs to the marquessate, Pascoe was a landless bastard. Theo’s grandfather, the first marquess, had provided heirs and spares, and then after his wife’s death, produced Pascoe with his mistress, just as his grown sons were producing Theo and his brothers. Pascoe was closer to his nephew than to his middle-aged half-brothers, Theo’s legitimate uncles.

Pascoe had always felt like the runt of an extremely large litter.

A renowned astronomer and the designer of fine telescopes, Theo leaned over the aperture of a rather large instrument, making notes on a high desk he'd built for just this purpose. His nephew was an anomaly in the family—slender, light-haired, almost ascetic in comparison to most of the large brutes that Ives regularly produced.

But Theo possessed the formidable Ives mind. His telescope manufactory had doubled production lately, and he'd received honors for his astronomical discoveries. There was talk that he might receive knighthood.

—An honor Pascoe craved with all his heart and soul. Possibly the only honor he could achieve given his birth, or lack of it.

“What are you doing here?” Theo asked, looking up from his task. He jotted a final note and came over to pound Pascoe on the back. “But I'll not complain of your company. Do you have any notion what it's like living in an all-female household?”

“I have no notion and no wish to learn,” Pascoe retorted, finding a brandy decanter and helping himself. “I have been tormented by children and women for days, and have just been dismissed by an unknown frost queen as if I were an insignificant insect. There is a reason I prefer the road over home life.”

“You wish to earn a knighthood,” Theo said with a laugh, understanding him too well. He accepted the glass Pascoe poured for him. “Your life has no women to escape. *You* drive yourself. I cannot imagine who you refer to as a frost queen. Most of Aster's relations are non-stop chatterboxes. I come up here to escape them.”

“Tall for a woman, stunning mountain of dark-reddish hair, eyes as green as an Irish pasture, wearing an expression of acid disdain.” Pascoe lingered over the memory of high breasts, slender waist, and lush lips, but thought those inappropriate to mention.

“Ah, that would be Lady Carstairs, the midwife. She's always seemed pleasant enough, if not exactly friendly.”

“Carstairs?” Pascoe's blood froze. He despised coincidence. “Wife of the earl of Carstairs?”

“Widow. The current earl is apparently an ass of immense proportions who tossed her out of her home after he inherited it. Claimed she was a witch trying to kill him. She's a cousin of Aster's and reportedly a highly-trained midwife.”

Pascoe threw back his brandy, pondering this unexpected development. He needed information, and he seized opportunity where he found it. An angry widow could be informative, if he could avoid being frostbitten.

“The current earl of Carstairs is the king's godson,” Pascoe explained, grimacing. “He and his brother are the offspring of one of

His Majesty's favorite admirals. I've been ordered to find out the cause of Carstairs' complaints about his rather impressive inheritance. The Northbridge mine and foundry produce almost half the iron in the country, and his workers are threatening strikes."

Theo lifted his snifter in sympathetic toast. "I wish you well with that. From all reports, Carstairs' laborers have good reason to be on the brink of rebellion. And if I'm gathering the situation rightly, that means if they shut down the blast furnace, the country's ships and railroads will cease construction?"

"The kingdom's industries will crawl to a halt," Pascoe agreed gloomily. "And the blame will rest on me if I don't resolve the situation. A *witch*? Carstairs is blaming the unrest on a *witch*?"

CHAPTER 2

“I TRUST you sent a servant for those books,” Bridey said in disapproval, eyeing her very-pregnant cousin’s stack of ancient tomes. “You know you are not to take the stairs at this late stage.”

Lady Aster patted the books on the table beside her charts. Short and already well-rounded, she carried her babe well. “Servants cannot find what I need. But I do send them up the ladders for me.”

Aster’s sister-in-law, Celeste Ives, laughed musically. Still remarkably slender for being in her eighth month, she worked on stitching baby clothes. “While Aster is training servants, she should train librarians,” she suggested.

“First, we would have to teach her workhouse castoffs to read,” Bridey corrected in frustration. “And then, we would have to teach them Latin because most of the earlier volumes were written by true scholars. Better that we simply hire a real librarian.”

“How many *female* librarians do you know?” Aster asked, consulting one of her books before sketching on her current work. “Inviting men here is asking for disaster.”

“Well, I would not exactly say *disaster*,” Celeste said, touching her belly. “I rather enjoyed having Erran here, and I cannot complain of the result.”

“This tower is teeming with old souls waiting for conception,” Bridey admonished, pouring tea and settling into a chair to keep an eye on her patients. She enjoyed these odd cozes with women who understood her abilities. “Bringing *unmarried* men here is dangerous. I hope our latest arrival brought his wife.”

“Pascoe?” Aster looked up from her work with a gleam in her eye. “I am working on his chart now. His stars are unbelievably focused, but he hides behind many disguises. Fascinating man. He was widowed a few years back, so no, he isn’t married. But he hasn’t been able to keep a nanny, and he’s hoping to dump the twins on us.”

Widowed. Bridey fought a shiver of apprehension. They needed to remove him from the household at the earliest possible moment. Not that *she* had to worry about conception, but the tower castle also teemed with young female servants.

“He’s still carrying Ashford’s sword stick,” Celeste said with amusement. “They bicker over it every time I see them together. What is the story behind that?”

Aster shrugged. "Typical Ives behavior. I believe the stick originally belonged to the first marquess, Pascoe's father. There is a difference of opinion as to which son he gave it to, the eldest or youngest. And of course, since Pascoe is illegitimate, there is a question as to whether he should have it at all, or if it should have stayed with the estate. Ives bicker, antagonize, and annoy just because they're men. There is no real rancor because they're all too busy to be bothered over inconsequential details."

"A sword stick would be a very convenient weapon," Bridey said, pondering this overflow of information. Since she no longer had any interest in men or their foibles, she shouldn't care who the bastard was, but his children worried her. "What does he do that requires a sword?"

"Theoretically, Pascoe works in transporting goods, but mostly, that means he acts as the king's envoy in difficult domestic situations. I shouldn't think in this day and age there would be any need for concealed weapons like the sword stick. It is just an affectation, like his monocle." Aster finally put her pen down and sipped her tea. "Which leads one to wonder why he is here. He did not say."

"I assumed Pascoe was simply passing through. Erran is due to arrive any day and would carry any message from the marquess." Celeste looked up with sudden concern. "Surely, if my husband is to be delayed, Ashford wouldn't need to send his uncle to tell us."

"Nothing would delay Erran from seeing his son arrive," Aster said reassuringly. "But Pascoe may be carrying messages about this summer's election to my father in Scotland."

Bridey was fascinated by her London relations and their city lives, but their politics caused her to yawn. She was more disturbed at the thought of a roving king's envoy when her brother was on the brink of leading rebellion. Even if Pascoe was heading to Scotland, Northbridge would be not far out of his way.

"Why can he not keep a nanny?" she asked out of curiosity. "Surely you have access to women eager for employment?"

Aster and her aunts saved women and children from workhouses and trained them as household help, but they also had access to lists of more educated, impoverished women needing employment as governesses and companions.

Her cousin wrinkled her nose in puzzlement. "I've never been sure. The twins are active, of course, but they've always seemed charming and well-behaved to me. Pascoe keeps his Scorpio intensity well controlled, so I cannot imagine he mistreats his servants, even on those few instances when he's actually home."

"And the servants do tend to leave while he's away," Celeste pointed out. "Perhaps the twins misbehave when they know he's not

home.”

“His aura is unusual,” Bridey offered with a moment’s hesitation. She could not talk of her gift with the villagers—or even with her late husband. But if *witches* existed, her cousins were far more witchy than she. “He possesses all the brilliant and intense shades of red with very little of the murky ones. There are hints of anger and dishonesty, but no more than I’ve seen in a child having a tantrum or stealing a cookie. I’d say he has a hint of clairaudience or some other perception most people do not display.”

Aster beamed and pointed at a place on her chart. “I thought so! He’s a more direct descendant of Lady Ninian than Theo and his brothers. They were not brought up to appreciate their Malcolm intuitions.”

“What do your charts say of the twins?” Bridey asked. “Their auras are also unusual. Many children are surrounded by white light because their aura energies are not fully formed, but the twins show a thin streak of violet. I would say they’re much too young to be displaying a spiritual nature. The only explanation I know would be clairvoyance.”

Aster’s eyes widened with interest. “I had not thought to do much with their charts since they are so young. But clairvoyance. . .”

She started to rise. Bridey pointed her back to her seat. “Tell me which books you need and I will fetch them.”

Aster frowned. “I do not know exactly. I sense which ones I need. I’m new to the Ives family. I know nothing of Pascoe’s late wife. I hadn’t heard that she was a Malcolm, but others besides us have intuitive talents. They just haven’t been trained to use them as we have and seldom keep journals, so I can’t expect to find anything about his marriage. And if his wife wasn’t Malcolm. . . There may be nothing to look up.”

“Someone needs to learn more about the children,” Celeste said, frowning with concern. “If they are true sensitives, they need aid in understanding their abilities so they do not feel like oddities when they grow up.”

Both Celeste and Aster turned to Bridey. Almost panicking at the idea of accepting the responsibility for children, she held up her hands in refusal. “It is not my place to determine their gifts. I’ve told you all I know. Read your charts and find him a suitable wife or listen to their voices or whatever it is you do.”

“They hardly ever speak that I’ve heard,” Celeste said, wrinkling up her nose in thought. “But I’ve not seen them often, admittedly.”

“They spoke clearly to me,” Bridey said without thinking, then mentally slapped herself when both women studied her with interest. She was living her own life from henceforth, not taking on the

burdens of others. "They ran away from their father and were looking for someone. I didn't see or hear anything unusual except their auras, which as I said, aren't fully formed. How old are they?"

"Three, maybe four now. I'll have the dates at home but I need the library—"

On familiar ground now, Bridey responded firmly. "Absolutely not. And from what you say, it seems unlikely that the library has much from the Ives branch of the family. After I dress for dinner, I will find some of your family's journals from three or four years ago to see if the twins are mentioned." Finishing her tea, Bridey rose, glad of a task to keep her occupied.

She was accustomed to being busy all day and half the night. She didn't know what to do with herself while waiting for her cousins to give birth.

Unless she wished to return to her grandfather's cottage with her brother and the elderly servants who had been pensioned there, she must find a place in this household. She could afford nothing better of her own. She had hoped Aster would permit her to start her midwifery school here, but until she had the funding. . .

Perhaps she could learn to be a librarian for a family of *witches*.

After what she'd been through, the notion gave her a wicked thrill.



"SIR." The little nursemaid hurried toward Pascoe.

On his way to change clothes before dinner, Pascoe grimaced and waited. He knew precisely what the maid had to say, and prepared his customary response.

"The children," she said nervously, "they have vanished. They were napping, and I stepped out for just a moment. . . ."

"Yes, they do that," he said with studied boredom. Nursemaids tended to panic and weep, and he'd prefer not to lose any more of them. "They'll turn up sooner or later, when they are hungry. See that they are not annoying anyone else, please."

Her eyes widened in astonishment, but a quick student, she bobbed a curtsy and hurried off.

Pascoe glanced toward the Frost Queen's door. He heard no childish laughter or voices from that direction. The brats might possibly have done something normal like annoying Theo in the tower or hiding under beds. He knew they had not.

Perhaps he should find them a noisy dog that would bark wherever they were. Putting bells on their clothing had not worked. They simply removed their clothes.

They were completely fearless, needing no one but each other. And since infantine minds knew no restrictions, their explorations were often hair-raisingly perilous.

With a sense of foreboding, he continued down the stairs toward his room, hoping they'd gone in search of him as usual, although how they'd know where he'd be was a mystery.

His quarters were in a series of small chambers across from the billiard room on the ground floor. Apparently unattached males were not allowed to stay in the upper stories. The billiard room was one of the few male retreats in the entire accursed castle, Theo had informed him. Built in simpler times, the Wystan tower was easy to navigate, if one did not mind walking through one chamber to the next. He had to pass through the immense library to access the billiard room.

If he had his preference, he'd be on his horse and headed out tonight, but the knowledge that the Carstairs countess was under this roof held him back. And think of the devil. . .

A regal female voice spoke from the library. "Yes, if you will climb up one more rung to reach the next shelf and fetch down the last two books on the right. . ."

Pascoe grimaced. Of course the children hadn't sought him. They'd sought the countess.

Wishing he had his walking stick to keep his hands occupied, he shoved one fist in his pocket, sloped his shoulders into a less intimidating stance, and sauntered in as if he hadn't a care in the world.

Sturdy Edward was perched precariously at the top of a long ladder, counting books and removing them per instructions. Delicate, like her mother, Emma flipped the pages of books scattered about the table with small fingers that could barely hold the heavy tomes.

Pascoe's heart lodged in his throat as he watched his only son scramble down the ladder with books under his short arms. He knew in his head that the child was a little monkey and was as safe as he'd ever be, but every protective instinct in his body screamed in fury.

While he bit his tongue until it should have bled, he absorbed the puzzlement of not quite four-year olds performing any of these feats. *Four years old!* They should not even read yet.

He dragged his gaze to the thoughtless female perpetrating this outrage.

The countess sat in all her royal glory—purple satin billowing sleeves and gold waist sash and a gold filigree collar that did not completely conceal the plump mounds of her breasts. She was dressed for dinner but perusing dusty tomes with a lace handkerchief in hand.

She had to know he was standing there. She deliberately ignored him.

The children did not. They looked up with bright, eager eyes the instant he stepped into the room. "Edward, Emma, you have worried your nursemaid. You should tell her where you are going." If the countess could be rude, so could he. He'd been on the receiving end of rude the better part of his life.

The twins' dark curls bobbed obligingly. They continued their tasks.

"If you wish your supper, you will go upstairs right now and apologize to Miss Mary," he insisted. They were generally obedient. His temper was for the woman encouraging them to disobey.

Emma wrinkled her little brow and tilted her head as if listening to angelic voices from on high. Edward deposited his books on the table and scampered back up the ladder.

"Mama says books are important," Emma finally said, concentrating on finding the page she was looking for.

Mama says? What the devil did that mean? Could they remember what Lily had told them as babes? Impossible. But his daughter had *spoken* to him—again, in the presence of the countess.

"Edward, Emma," the lady said with quiet warning, "your mama doesn't mean for you to be disobedient. Books *are* important, but it is also important to be respectful of others."

Beneath identical dark curls, both angelic faces puckered in identical frowns.

Pascoe loved and adored his children, but they were a complete puzzlement to him. He'd once thought children were simple creatures to be trained like dogs or ponies until they were sufficiently civilized to be let out of the nursery.

That they were not simple was just becoming clear to him.

"You shouldn't encourage their nonsense," he insisted.

The countess ignored his reprimand but watched the children with expectation.

They finally set down their tasks, made a polite curtsy and bow, and trotted past him to run up the stairs like the pair of scamps he knew them to be.

That left him stranded with the angry widow, who would not even acknowledge his presence. Although he often strove to hide the fact, he was an Ives. He enjoyed a good challenge as much as the rest of his obstreperous family.

The countess was part of the key to unlocking the difficult situation he'd been handed. Many women worked at being useless trivialities, but he was fairly certain this one had live matter inside her brain pan. *Chilly* live matter, perhaps, but he would try to be open-minded.

"My children have an odd affinity for you," he said, leaning his

shoulder against the door jamb. It wasn't as if they'd been introduced. "I don't suppose you would be a governess, would you?"

"Do I look like a governess?" she asked, not looking up from the tome she was poring over.

"I try to keep an open mind," he said with wicked delight, recalling his resolve to do so. "I'm Aaron Pascoe-Ives, commonly referred to as Pascoe to avoid confusing me with the more legitimate branch of the family." And because *Mr. Ives* was too confusing and tedious and the reason he wished a *Sir* added to the name. *Pascoe* was his mother's surname and what his family called him.

"I am working on a task for Lady Aster. Is there something you need?"

"Need?" he asked with deviltry, raising his monocle. If she did not introduce herself, he did not have to acknowledge her with the respect due a peer of the realm. "I need a woman, a mother for my children. I need wealth and title. I need land. I need the answer to the mysteries of the universe. If you'd like to take on any of those tasks. . ."

"No, thank you," she said coolly. "I believe God is to be found inside the chapel at the front of the house. I bid you good luck in finding Him."

Did he have time to crack her hard shell? Or should he forget her and ride on to Northbridge? Dealing with a half-wit earl might be simpler, despite Pascoe's fascination with the countess. "Ah well, I prefer to leave larger matters in the hands of providence and take on smaller ones on my own. Shall I see you at dinner?"

"Not completely," was her enigmatic reply.

CHAPTER 3

MR. AARON PASCOE-Ives was unlike any gentleman she'd ever met, Bridey had to admit. Her late husband had seldom entertained anyone besides his hunting companions, and they'd been gray-haired, bewhiskered bores. Fin had occasionally brought his university friends home with him on holidays, but they were callow youths.

Mr. . . Pascoe. . . was far from callow. She surmised his age to be about that of Lord Theo, early thirties or a little older, with no discernible gray in his thick black hair. But Lord Theo was an absent-minded scientist who often walked about with his neckcloth awry and gravy stains on his waistcoat. Bridey thought Mr. Pascoe probably stepped out of bed looking immaculate.

And she would not start thinking of what he looked like *in* bed. Underneath that effete façade he was taller than she, wide-shouldered, broad-chested, and everything a man ought to be—physically. She feared no man existed who was what he ought to be morally, ethically, or emotionally, especially one who disguised his true nature.

But this man was intelligent enough to know when he wasn't wanted. He bowed farewell and departed the library, presumably in search of his errant children.

Feeling slightly guilty that she'd been investigating their birth, but intrigued with their abilities, Bridey gathered up the collected tomes and carried them up to Aster.

A dinner table had been laid in the ladies' salon so the expectant mothers need not go down to the formal dining hall. Since Lord Theo was in residence, they usually laid a place for him as well. Tonight, there was a new place set, presumably for their visitor. Bridey grimaced but stayed with her assigned task.

The men hadn't arrived yet. She could speak freely. "Did you not tell me that the new Lady Ashford speaks with ghosts?" Bridey set the books on the reading table at the window. She had never met the Marquess of Ashford or his new bride.

"Christie—Lady Ashford—says she has voices in her head that purport to be some of our ancestors," Aster replied, waddling over to flip open the new stack of books. "I don't think it's quite the same as speaking with ghosts. Why?"

Bridey was still adjusting to the custom of the Ives ladies speaking intimately of each other instead of using titles. Not wanting to appear

a country bumpkin, she had resolved to speak honestly with these ladies. "I believe the twins' mother may haunt them."

The ladies stared, but male voices could be heard approaching. Bridey shook her head in warning. She had no intention of revealing her idiosyncrasies to skeptical men.

Aster made the introductions when the gentlemen entered. Bridey retreated into her defensive shell, shutting out Mr. Pascoe's pulsing reds and Lord Theo's more studious orange-yellows. That didn't mean she could shut them out entirely.

After years of wearing drab and muted fabrics to suit Carstairs, and then her year of mourning, Bridey had ordered new gowns, in colors that pleased her, but she regretted it now. Violet with her hair had a tendency to draw notice.

Mr. Pascoe donned his obnoxious monocle to regard her with pretend interest, altering his powerful persona into a languid, inoffensive dandy. "My lady, charmed, I'm sure," he said in a bored drawl, bending over her hand.

His hand was warm and strong, and he squeezed hers familiarly. She yanked it back. "Of course," she said in the same tone, refusing to puzzle over his idle disguise. With a regal nod, she strode to the far side of the table.

"It is always good to have fresh blood," Celeste murmured with laughter for Bridey's ears alone.

"His is not fresh but that of a stale courtier. I would not trust a word he says." Although, if she gave it much thought, Bridey might surmise that it wasn't Pascoe's words that lied, it was his *attitude*. That would be interesting to study, but she refused to acknowledge him as more than a passing breeze.

She had meant it when she had told Mr. Pascoe that he would not see all of her at the table. She was an expert at concealing her true nature. To her dismay, she had to consider that he might be the same.

"What brings you to this barren outpost, Mr. Pascoe?" Aster asked, taking her place as hostess at the end of the table.

In this intimate setting, Bridey sat beside Celeste, with Lord Theo at her right and Mr. Pascoe directly across. Perhaps she should start taking meals in her room.

"There is interest in railroads to transport iron ores from the north. I am simply sent to study the situation," their guest replied with the blandness of a suave politician. "I must compliment your chef. The soup is delicious."

Bridey froze, then lowered her eyes to hide her fear. Iron ores came from mines. Foundries cast the ore into usable products. The only mine and foundry in the vicinity belonged to Carstairs—the one Fin meant to shut down.

Aster had said Pascoe was the king's envoy. His idle disguise concealed the king's spy. She could not taste the soup at all.

"And you must bring the children with you? Did the most excellent nanny Aster found for you not wish to travel?" Celeste asked.

"Apparently family obligations came up," he said with a dismissive gesture, sitting back and allowing a footman to fill his wine glass. "The ways of servants are many and mysterious. Will it be a difficulty if I leave them in the nursery a day or two while I ride north?"

"Of course not," Lord Theo said, taking his uncle's words at face value. "Lady Carstairs says we will not be needing it for another few weeks. The maids are sitting about idle."

"A few weeks, and you, too, will know the joys of fatherhood," Mr. Pascoe said with a sly grin. "I might just linger to see how you fare."

"Oh, no, sorry," Aster said with seriousness. "Unless you wish to be a father again, it is very bad luck for you to be here when a child is born. Just ask Erran."

Bridey noted that their guest's eyes danced with laughter as he solemnly agreed that it would be most unfortunate to end up like Erran. She glanced at Celeste, who ought to be insulted, but the lady apparently understood the jest and merely smiled. Celeste had the serenity of a saint. Bridey wanted to fling soup bowls at his callous disregard of Malcolm legends.

She would be the first to admit that she was a trifle sensitive on the matter of legends.

"Forgive my curiosity," Mr. Pascoe said graciously, lifting his wine glass in Bridey's direction, "but how does a countess become a midwife?"

She couldn't rudely ignore a relation of her hosts in company, but she could refrain from answering long enough that chatty Aster jumped in for her.

"Bridey is too modest," she said. "Her grandfather is related to the duke of Sommersville and studied medicine with him. Viscount Blair was quite renowned in these parts. He trained Bridey, and after his death, she has followed in his footsteps."

Pascoe donned his obnoxious monocle to regard her with interest. "Ah, so you are more in the way of a physician than a midwife? How very enterprising of you and enlightened of Carstairs. The surgeons in London would have any female medical practitioner up on charges for such heresy."

Her late husband had known little of her activities, including her use of forceps and scalpels, which surgeons insisted only they could

use. As long as she was available in George's bed when he felt an urge, he hadn't known she existed.

Bridey didn't rise to the bait but merely regarded His Nosiness with contempt.

"Gilroy is the new earl, ain't he?" Pascoe asked, unperturbed by her refusal to argue. "Nephew of your husband? Bit of a loose screw, eh? Too much marrying between cousins?"

Bridey stared at him in incredulity. She had seen his aura. He was not an idiot. So why was he trying to sound like one? Because he was *spying*. Another mental slap to the head.

His smile was devilish now that he had her attention. "Knew the lad in our wayward youth. Eton was above us so we muddled along in the lesser schools. Gilroy's young, so can't say that we were chums. He might have been a colossal loss as a student, but his father was third in line to a title, and he let the rest of us plebeians know it."

"Carry a grudge, do you?" Bridey asked neutrally, giving him no insight into her thought on the matter of the new earl.

"Hadh't remembered his existence until I heard your name," he replied genially, cutting into his fish. "Know nothing at all of your husband. Did not get about much, did he? I meet most everyone who is anyone over the course of my travels. Never met Carstairs."

The king's envoy was seeking information, to what purpose? Could she help Fin's cause in any way? She knew how to be diplomatic, but she knew nothing of foundries and kings and politics.

"Carstairs had the gout," she finally offered when the silence grew long enough that she knew others listened. "He did not leave home."

"Ah, so you galloped about the countryside, healing the ill, while he lounged about the fire, directing his minions. A most excellent division of labor, eh? You and Gilroy have a falling out that you've deserted your patients?" He didn't even bother looking up from his plate as he talked.

"I do not make a very interesting topic of conversation, Mr. Pascoe," Bridey said coldly. "Should you not be bringing the latest news to your hosts, who are stranded here in this outpost while London goes on without them?"

Aster snickered. Theo grinned. Neither said a word. They were waiting to be entertained. She'd like to smack them both.

Pascoe waved his fork dismissively. "The new Lady Ashford sends a constant stream of information to our hosts. The marchioness is tireless. I could not begin to compare. The only news of importance at the moment is when these two lovely ladies will bear their brood and come home. That is not a subject for a confirmed bachelor like myself. I am far more interested in you."

"I am not interesting," Bridey said with firmness, refusing to meet

his dark eyes. His intense scrutiny beneath his deceptive insouciance made her aware that she was female, and he was very much male. She'd not known sensual awareness in a decade, maybe more, if ever, and she didn't appreciate it now. "I am a widowed midwife, nothing more. You are the traveler. Perhaps you should recount your adventures."

"It is all boring meetings." He waved his wine glass, although she noticed he did not drink from it often. "Bringing obstinate men together, forcing them to talk. I see nothing more than the insides of dark chambers. I thought perhaps you could tell me more of Northbridge, what sights I should see, what sights I should avoid."

Forcing men to talk. Bridey could see how that might happen. He was relentless. And he was definitely heading toward Carstairs' troubled mine. She threw a frustrated glance to Aster, who simply winked. Celeste was lost in her own world, not paying attention. And Lord Theo wasn't a talker at the best of times.

"Northbridge is no more than any small village," she said reluctantly. "An inn, a tavern, a mercantile. The foundry laborers live outside of the village. The mine, of course, is even farther out. If transportation is needed, I know nothing of it."

That wasn't a lie. She knew nothing of transportation. The laborers, however, she knew all about. Their working conditions had deteriorated since Carstairs had taken over. Fin had improved their hours and wages in his brief stint as manager, but her husband had died before Fin had been able to make great inroads. And now Gilroy's miserable brother was in charge.

She chewed her bread slowly, as if she had no other thought beyond digestion.

"Yes, well, I suppose I shall find out for myself," Pascoe said airily. "If I might leave the small ones here, I'll ride out to have a chat with my old chum. Would you care to come with me, Lady Carstairs? I have brought a most comfortable carriage. Now that Ashford has seen fit to clear the roads out of this remote abode, it should be a pleasurable journey in the balmy spring air."

She sipped her water and returned to looking at her plate. "No, thank you."

"Not even to see your old patients or the doddering family relics? You have given them all up to Gilroy?" His voice had a harder edge to it.

"You are badgering my cousin, Pascoe," Aster said with quiet finality. "Go speak with your loose screw and leave Bridey alone."

"My most humble pardon." He tilted his glass in her direction again. "Shall we speak of the upcoming elections? Do you think the Whigs will throw out the remainder of the old rotten boroughs this

time around?"

The discussion of politics swirled around Bridey without her notice. She needed to warn Fin that the king's man was on his way. Riots and strikes while Mr. Pascoe was in the vicinity would kill any chance he had of peacefully changing Gilroy's wretched policies. There would be an army on Fin's doorstep.

Her insides too knotted to eat, she finally excused herself and left the dinner party enjoying the cook's blackberry tarts. Her grandfather's carrier pigeons knew the way home to Fin. That was the best she could do for him, even as her heart broke over the home she would never know again.

CHAPTER 4

AFTER SENDING her warning to Fin via carrier pigeon, Bridey couldn't resist stopping in the nursery. She'd never have children of her own, but she cherished little ones, and these two intrigued her.

A single small lamp burned in the dark recesses of the long chamber. The nursemaid nodded off in a rocking chair. The twins were tucked into the cots they'd pushed together, their arms wrapped around ragged dolls. Opening her senses for a peek, Bridey saw the pink aura still hovering protectively over them.

It seemed the twins really didn't need a nanny to guard them.

Bridey had an intellectual craving for the ability to speak with ghosts, but a very real fear of possession. Besides, what would she say to one, after all? It was apparent the twins' late mother lingered to watch over her babies. Perhaps Bridey could ask her how much good a ghost could do, but that would be cruel. Instead, she nodded respectfully at the wary aura, then backed out, shutting the door with a click.

She returned to her own chamber—where Mr. Pascoe had settled into her reading chair, one leg crossed over his knee, a Malcolm journal in his lap, for all the world as if he belonged there.

After the haunting loneliness of the nursery, she almost wished he did belong on her hearth. She would like someone with whom to discuss ghosts and twins and other familiar subjects. But he was all arrogant, presumptuous man and worthless to her.

"Out," she commanded, standing in the doorway and pointing at the corridor, while her irrational heart slammed against her corset. She might be a widow and allowed more liberty than an unmarried girl, but she had no intention of letting men exploit that freedom.

He lifted his head. The firelight glinted in the blue-blackness of his pomaded hair and shadowed the high bones of his cheeks and his long thin nose. Reluctantly, he closed the book and stood, filling the room with the force of his character. He did not leave. "The dovecote works well with the pigeons, does it not?"

How did this devil know about Fin's pigeons? He'd only been here a few hours!

"I have no idea what you mean. I want you out of my room now, before I call the servants." She was vaguely aware that the servants were mostly women. She'd have to call Theo to throw out his own

uncle. Helplessness made her furious.

“Don’t go missish on me,” he said in disdain, with a dismissive gesture of his long-boned hand. “We’re adults, not foolish adolescents who need to bow to society’s whims.”

She didn’t need to be reminded that as a lonely widow, she was fair game. He was a full grown male, a predator primed with society’s expectations of their sexes. Even without opening herself to his aura, she could see the intensity of his needs in his heated gaze.

Still in his formal evening wear, Mr. Pascoe was imperiously handsome despite his affected monocle and dandified silk pocket handkerchief.

“We cannot possibly have anything to say to each other that cannot be said in public,” she countered.

“Our hosts have no interest in Northbridge. We do. Do be sensible and sit down. I’ll be leaving in the morning and don’t have time for games.” He spoke curtly, like any overworked government official. He gestured with his stick at the second chair before the fire—the smaller one without the wing back.

“Have a good journey,” she answered with a cold smile. “Now leave.”

Sighing impatiently, he set the stick aside. “I dislike threatening people with whom I’d prefer to work, but you don’t leave me much choice. I would prefer your cooperation in determining the solution to Northbridge’s mining problem, but I have a feeling I cannot do so if the earl and the village insist on calling you a witch who has cursed the entire town.”

All her frosty bravado melted. *He knew*. The devil had walked in here a few hours ago and already knew her deepest, darkest pain.

She wanted to fling things and shout for the servants, but he was right. That was only her wounded pride reacting—and her fear for her brother.

“And why should I trust an errand-boy for the king?” she asked with the same disdain he’d displayed earlier—but despite her outward display of fearlessness, she entered and closed the door as requested. If he could provide her with information, she must protect Fin.

Pascoe shrugged and crossed to a table where he poured a drink from a decanter that hadn’t been there when she’d last been in the room. He offered her a glass—just as if she were a man and his equal. She wouldn’t trust even this gesture.

When she refused, he poured one for himself. “Why do I have the feeling you would not trust any man?”

“Perhaps because you are perceptive.” Angry that he understood her so well, she took the large chair he’d abandoned, leaving the smaller one for him.

Instead of sitting, he paced, filling the room with vibrations so strong that Bridey thought she might pluck them like the strings of a harp. "You conceal far more than you reveal," she added. "Please do not underestimate my intelligence."

He nodded agreement. "You want honesty." After a moment's thought, he yanked off his starched collar, shrugged out of his form-fitting coat, and unknotted his neckcloth. Shocked, Bridey almost stood up to run from the room, but she sensed his restraint. A man this intense did not peel off his clothes with dispassion if he meant harm. She froze and watched his performance with fascination.

In a few strokes, he cast aside the insouciant, fashionable diplomat and transformed into a real man of broad shoulders, muscled chest, and determination. He ran his hand through his overlong hair, rumpling until it fell across his wide brow. That gesture alone altered him into the kind of man she'd want in her boudoir, a powerful man she would love to trust with all her lonely heart—and a lot more.

Only the impatience in his dark eyes and gestures said he wasn't thinking about the bed looming not feet away—or not overtly, at least. His actions reminded her that he was a destructive, self-centered man, the same as any other.

"This is me, as I am, concealing nothing," he said roughly. "I may be a bastard in the eyes of the world, but I'm a father who wants the best for his children. I'm a gentleman who wants what is best for his country. I do not mistreat women and children, although I've been known to torment fools and bash heads when required. I am no saint. I accept that Lady Aster's family is unusual. I do *not*, however, believe in witches." His emphasis was almost angry.

Had she been a few years younger, she would have been impressionable enough to swoon at his looks and declarations. Experience hardened her.

"Very pretty," she said dryly, acknowledging his manly form and speech in disparaging dismissal. "Witches haven't been burned at the stake in a hundred years, so it matters little what you believe. What do you wish of me? Because do not mistake, I know you are a schemer who uses people. I have not yet consented to being used."

Silent, he was all male animal prowling in the firelight, considering her reply. She liked that he actually listened, even if he was determining how to use her. Watching him pace, Bridey fought irrational urges, because he was right. They were both adults here. What would it be like to share a bed with a real man and not a gout-ridden doddering invalid?

"The mines and furnace at Northbridge are of national importance," he finally said. "Their new process produces iron faster than anywhere else in the world. The foundry is operating with

processes no one else possesses. The king cannot allow the mine to close or the furnace to shut down.”

Bridey wished for the brandy she'd refused. Fin's furnace had been noticed outside Northbridge?

When he'd been at school, her brother had convinced engineers from Edinburgh to turn their talents on Carstairs' extensive coal and iron ore holdings. She'd persuaded her husband that the techniques would make him more money than they would cost. After years of effort, they had been well on their way to improving the lives of the miners and the foundry laborers when George had died. Their goal had been to help the village, not the entire *kingdom*.

Her late husband had been self-absorbed, so it had been easy to persuade him to hand tasks over to others. Once Fin had his degree, George had hired her brother to run the operations. As long as more money poured into his coffers, he'd been happy to let Fin do as he pleased.

The new earl, George's nephew, was a preening, spineless, simpleton. The kingdom would go to hell before she'd help the new earl and his evil brother.

She folded her hands in her lap and watched Pascoe with disinterest. “And what am I to make of that? It's not as if we're at war and in need of new ships—or that I know anything of making iron.”

He glared at her, and she almost shivered.

“I was told to head for Northbridge straight away,” he said, his impatience giving way to irritation. “I gave up the family outing I'd promised the twins to ride here without all the facts in hand. I'm a man who deals in facts. The more I know going in, the faster I can fix whatever the problem is and get out.”

“I still fail to see how I can help you,” she said.

He frowned. “Do not sit there and look innocent. A woman of your intelligence had a hand in every simmering pot before you left. I'm surmising that the old earl's death, his nephew's arrival, and your departure are all part of the mine's current problems.”

“A trifle obvious,” she agreed. “Things changed once the new earl appointed new management. He would not listen to me. The problems are not ones that can be fixed by riding in and throwing the king's weight around. One cannot fix stupidity, arrogance, and avarice.”

The half smile he offered was so far beyond wicked that it gave her heart palpitations.

“Now, *you* are underestimating *me*.” Finally, he took the smaller chair she'd left for him. Nursing his brandy between his palms, he leaned forward, with his elbows on his knees. Firelight gleamed on the bronzed chest he'd exposed. “Or perhaps I should say, you are underestimating the king's power. The mine and furnace are a matter

of national security. Stupidity can be removed.”

She wanted to believe him—just as she’d believed so many people in the past, people she’d known and trusted. No more. He was using her, just as she’d predicted and he’d admitted.

“Gilroy is nothing like his uncle,” she said, because that would be obvious to anyone who met him. “He is young, impetuous, and eager to spend his inheritance. He has hired his brother to run the operations of mine and foundry.” None of that was anything Pascoe wouldn’t learn by riding into town. “I know nothing more.”



“AND THIS BROTHER is cut from the same cloth as the earl?” Pascoe demanded, concealing his impatience. The woman was more enigmatic than the Sphinx, and about as forthcoming.

The intimacy of practically sitting knee-to-knee in her bedchamber heightened his awareness. The countess was gorgeous with the light of the fire dancing in her rich auburn hair and warming her ivory shoulders. Her nose had a slight up-tilt to it, and her lips were too plush to successfully pull off the Frost Queen demeanor in close proximity. Only when she stood tall and regal at a distance did the small details disappear behind her very large attitude. He could see why people labeled her witch. The strong women he knew were often labeled with that epithet, but their only magic was in frightening ignorant people.

“Worse,” she said reluctantly. “Oscar Darrow is also a brute.”

Pascoe grasped the difficulty. Two impetuous, privileged idiots would not listen to a woman, no matter how experienced she might be. If one of the dolts was inclined toward violence, especially toward women, then she had been right to leave. What he could not ascertain was why she was reluctant to discuss her obvious anger and the reasons for it. There was more at work here than she was revealing. If he offered aid, could he gain her trust?

“The miners and foundry laborers are suffering,” he suggested.

“Possibly,” she said. “I have not been there for some months.”

“You do not communicate with anyone in Northbridge?” he asked, knowing that was a lie. The pigeons alone gave her away.

“Why should I? They scorned me as a devil-worshipper and were relieved when I left. It’s not as if I had much in common with miners.”

He didn’t have time for this. If he stayed longer, he’d end up thinking of seduction rather than the problem at hand.

“I am not asking for aid with the miners. I’m asking for your aid with information, which you continue to withhold.” He finished off his brandy, set the snifter aside, and stood up to don his coat. “If you

don't wish to help the kingdom and possibly the lives of many, fine. I don't have time to pull teeth. I'll find out what I need on my own."

"You will do as you please no matter what I say," she said. "I have left Northbridge behind and intend to move forward with my life."

"You know more than the two imbeciles I must consult tomorrow. But you prefer to sit in a tower, wasting your intelligence and knowledge on delivering babies," he said in scorn. He didn't know why that irritated him so much, but it did. "How does this make you better than Carstairs?"

"That's insulting," she said with suppressed rage. "Now leave." She stood commandingly, as if she were accustomed to ordering people from her presence.

Pascoe had been the brunt of too many people who considered themselves his superior to tolerate taking orders from anyone except a monarch now. He stood a mere stride away, and she faced him as if he were of no more importance than a fence post. The temptation, combined with his frustration, was simply too great.

He crossed the small distance, dragged her up against him, and kissed those luscious lips as he'd been longing to do since their first encounter. She felt like heaven in his arms, and smelled and tasted of dreams he might never achieve. Her kiss opened an ache where his heart ought to be.

At first, she stiffened and shoved her hands against his chest—until embers flared, fires ignited, and she melted into his embrace, curling her fingers in his linen. He felt her longing because it reflected his own. He wanted to lift her and carry her to that bed. . . .

That was when he realized the danger and set her away. "I do not apologize," he said curtly, suffering the loss of her warmth and suppleness already. "I enjoyed that far more than I should have. If I had any choice at all, I would know more of you. Unfortunately, I do not have the luxury of time. I will be leaving early in the morning. Will you look in on the twins while I am gone?"

She balled her fingers into fists and glared at him. "Fortunately for you, I do not blame the sins of the fathers on the children. Good evening." She pointed at the door.

He hadn't handled a situation so badly since his youth. His only excuse was that she'd crawled under his skin and gnawed there like some irritating insect he needed to swat.

And now he was paying the penalty, probably with a fatal sting.

CHAPTER 5

BLESS THE GODS AND DEMONS, the twins were still safely in their beds the next morning when Pascoe rode out. He'd spent a rough night tossing and turning after that heated encounter with the frost queen. How could an icicle like the countess pour molten lava into one simple kiss? He swore she'd seared his soul in ways Lily never had.

Females were a deterrent to clear thought, devil take it. He'd vowed to set aside any thought of relationships until he had a title, land, and sufficient wealth to find a sweet, maternal sort of woman for the twins—tasks so massive he could only accomplish one at a time. For now, since they were seldom useful to his goals, women merely interfered with his work.

Saving a vital national resource like the Northbridge mines could be the mission that earned him a knighthood. He wanted his children to have the superior schools and connections that his illegitimacy had prevented. Perhaps girls couldn't attend Eton, but that was no reason his daughter couldn't have the finest female education. No one would look down on his children with distaste, or worse, cut them cold. All of society would be open to them if he stayed the course.

The old nag he'd borrowed from the stable for this part of the journey plodded, but the dull pace gave him time to structure his plan. He needed more information. Lady Carstairs' insinuation that the operations manager mistreated his laborers offered a starting place. He'd packed his formal clothes in a valise and dressed like a humble merchant for his entrance into Northbridge. The laborers were far more likely to speak with someone closer to their own status.

Persuading an arrogant dunce to boot his brute of a brother out of a lucrative position for the sake of a kingdom would not be simple, if the countess had stated the case correctly. For his own sake, Pascoe hoped Lady Carstairs had been exaggerating.

Before he even arrived in town, he knew she had not. Smoke curled above the treetops and spread across the horizon. Mining operations and blast furnaces blighted landscapes, he knew, but this was not the thin streaming cloud of a smokestack.

His mission here had been critical, and he'd dallied too long by coming from London in a carriage.

He urged his nag into a faster trot, aiming for the factory and not the manor house in the opposite direction. As he rode over the hill, he

could see flames licking along the roof of a low industrial building, near a chimney. A mob blocked the road and spilled down the hillside, preventing any access to the conflagration. They didn't appear to be rioting, just calmly watching the building burn.

In between the mob and the buildings several angry men waved fists and shouted. None of them were dressed as gentlemen. Were these management? Ringleaders? Or both? Multiple violent outcomes played in Pascoe's mind as he kneed his horse forward. None of them were conducive to solving his task in any remotely amicable manner.

A roar rose up from the crowd as he approached. One of the bigger men shouting inside the circle pointed in Pascoe's direction. He thought he heard the cry of "the king's man!" before a shot rang out—and he was knocked sprawling from his horse.

His last thought was of the twins—and the countess. *She'd warned the laborers of his arrival.*



"BRIDEY, Bridey! You have to come!" Fin's voice echoed through the nursery's open window, along with the galloping of a horse.

Bridey froze, recognizing her brother's panic. The twins watched her wordlessly, as they had ever since she'd sat down to read them a book. Their brilliant blue eyes studied her with worry now, as if they knew something was very wrong. Well, shouts and galloping horses would tell them that.

Telling herself that if Fin were well enough to ride, then all she knew and loved was safe, she handed the book to the nursemaid. "I had better see what my brother wants," she said with a calm she didn't feel.

"Mama says papa needs you," Emma said in a scared little voice.

A chill rolled down her spine. She could dismiss the child's spooky warning as imagination—as their nannies had probably done.

Or she could heed her, *believe this child talked to a dead woman*, and become involved in what was no business of her own—

Fin wouldn't be out there if it wasn't something serious, probably requiring medical attention. Her stomach knotted. She had vowed to move forward and never to be involved with the village again. Ever.

But what if something *had* happened to Mr. Pascoe? The obnoxious man was a puzzlement, but he was the twins' *father*.

He was the kind of man she meant to avoid, but his kiss. . . His kiss had taught her what she'd never really known—physical desire. Definitely a man to be avoided, but he was the only parent these children knew. If nothing else, she must relieve their anxiety.

"I'll see what I can do," she promised. And to her amazement, the

children offered encouraging smiles.

Really, they were too uncanny for words. Even though she recognized a broader cosmos than most, she understood why superstitious servants might abandon them.

Lifting her skirt and petticoats, she ran down from the attic nursery. Celeste and Aster must have heard. They were making their cumbersome way out of their chambers and toward the stairs as Bridey raced down.

“Don’t you dare touch those stairs,” Bridey shouted at them. “If I have to leave for Northbridge, you can’t deliver those babes until I return!”

She couldn’t believe she’d just said that. Apparently, neither could the ladies. They halted where they were.

Bridey raced past them, down toward the ground floor. A maid had opened the door for Fin, and he stood rumpled and sweat-stained, twisting his hat in the main hall below.

“They shot the king’s man,” he said when she was half way down. “The one you warned us about.”

Mr. Pascoe! They had *shot* Mr. Pascoe?

“What have you done?” she asked in horror, turning and rushing back up the stairs. Fin loped after her. What had *she* done by sending Pascoe up there, uninformed?

“The furnace laborers walked out on Darrow this morning. The furnace was left untended and the foundry caught fire. When they learned the king was sending a man, they panicked. They were afraid he would send an army. The pigeons aren’t trained to fly here yet, so I rode over. He was unconscious when I left. We can’t let him die!”

This was her fault. She should never have sent the warning. But she’d been afraid for *Fin*, not Pascoe. . . .

“Have them saddle up my horse,” she ordered. “I’ll need to change and fill my bag. How bad is it?”

“I don’t know. They knocked him off his horse, and he hasn’t regained consciousness. There was a lot of blood. Mrs. Mac is tending him, but she can’t remove bullets.” Fin wiped his brow with the back of his arm.

“Get some water and food before you drop. I’ll be down as quickly as I can.” She saw Celeste and Aster hovering and turned to them. “Mr. Pascoe has been hurt. We’ll take pigeons with us. If Theo will watch for them, I can send a message as soon as I reach him. There is nothing you can do at present except look after his children.”

“I haven’t finished his chart,” Aster said worriedly. “The points are difficult with his stars. Take care of yourself,” she added with even more concern.

Knowing the superstition and poverty she was riding back into,

Bridey nodded. If the villagers hated her before, they'd truly do so now if she allowed the king's messenger to send troops. Anger often had violent repercussions.

She changed into a riding habit, packed fresh clothing, and gathered up her medical bag. She hadn't had much use for it these last months, but she kept her dried herb supply filled as she'd been taught. Some things were ingrained.

She ran up to the tower to give Theo details on pigeon care. "If Aster or Celeste show any sign of stress, you are to send a bird immediately, understood? They know their way to Fin's place, and his housekeeper watches for them."

"Are you sure I should not go with you?" Theo asked worriedly. "If Pascoe is hurt—"

"I'm the only physician available," she finished for him. "There is nothing you can do that Fin and I can't do better. You are needed here more." She raced down the stairs again, her heart thumping in panic.

Fin met her in the stable. "I need to borrow this gelding. Mine hasn't had time to recover. Do you think the owner will mind?"

"I don't recognize it. The pony that's usually here is gone. What was Mr. Pascoe riding?" She checked the straps on her own mare and used the mounting block while Fin threw a saddle on the gelding and attached her bags.

"Nothing as grand as this gelding. Did they shoot the wrong man?" he asked in horror. "He didn't look like anyone who had ever seen a king."

"You shot a complete stranger simply because you didn't know him?" Bridey couldn't conceal her dismay.

"I didn't shoot him. Gus must have. You said the king was sending a man, and this fellow was the only one who entered town. He rode straight for the foundry." Fin mounted and followed her out. "But he had no papers on him. We don't even know his name."

Remembering how Pascoe had transformed in her chamber last night from courtier to. . . what? Not laborer, for certain. Not a lord. Just a man doing what he'd been told to do. She didn't dare try to describe him to her brother like that.

"If he was riding the stable pony, that's probably Mr. Pascoe, the king's man, uncle of the marquess of Ashford. If anything happens to him, troops will descend on Northbridge of a certainty," she said in resignation. "He has two children upstairs in the nursery. You better not have killed him or every Ives in the kingdom will be on your doorstep. That will be worse than a king's army."

Fin muttered an obscenity and kicked the powerful gelding—probably Pascoe's—into a gallop. Bridey followed suit.

She had traveled from Northbridge to Wystan by gig, carrying all

her worldly possessions in a trunk and a few bags. She remembered the journey as long. Even though she was now flying past fields and houses on a fast horse, this return trip felt hours longer.

How long had Pascoe been lying there, injured? He must have arrived in the village before noon for Fin to have reached her before the evening meal. It would be growing dark before they returned. All day. He'd been lying there all day without proper medical attention.

She wasn't a physician. She'd never been to Edinburgh, much less attended any university. She knew only what her grandfather had taught her, and that had been outdated even as she'd learned it. Fin was the one who should have followed in her grandfather's footsteps, but she'd been the one who had taken to healing. He'd been more interested in machinery than people.

She prayed Mr. Pascoe was up and shouting his rage by the time they arrived.

As they neared the village, Fin pointed down the path to grandda's cottage to indicate that's where they'd taken their patient. It belonged to both of them now, although Bridey hadn't lived there since adolescence. But it was home.

Fin had kept the old stone house in good repair, but it would never be more than an ancient Peel tower crudely expanded over generations.

Bridey left Fin to rub down the horses. Taking her medical bag, she lifted her skirts and raced up the long, shallow staircase in the hillside. The timber front door opened for her, and Mrs. MacTavish stood there, wrapping her plump hands in her apron, her wrinkled face a study in joy and worry.

"Aye, and ye're home, none too soon," she said. "It's a long auld ride."

One did not hug servants, although Bridey was tempted. She smiled tiredly. Ignoring the housekeeper's suggestion, she headed directly for the room their grandfather had set up as his small hospital. He'd once filled the ancient stone cellar of the tower with patients during an influenza epidemic, but his joints hadn't allowed him to go up and down the stairs much as he aged. Hence, the upstairs infirmary now existed where the dining room should have been.

Mrs. MacTavish tut-tutted and followed after her, at a slower pace. She'd been old when grandda was alive. "He's not awake yet. I'll bring ye summat to eat."

Bridey knew better than to argue, though she couldn't eat a bite until she understood the task facing her.

The cot had been curtained off, not just for privacy, but to keep out the draft from the stone walls and thin glass of the window.

Bridey set her bag down on a wooden table older than she was and washed her hands at the porcelain basin that Mrs. Mac had already filled. The water was cool but the lye soap was as potent as ever.

Well trained, the housekeeper already had water boiling over the coal fire, but Bridey would save that for the unpleasant task ahead.

Generally, she did not work with male patients, except for the occasional broken bone or burn she could bandage with the whole family watching. She had treated George's gout and digestive orders, of course, although treating a husband was quite different from a strange gentleman.

Biting her bottom lip, she edged the curtain away with her shoulder and studied the man on Mrs. Mac's clean sheets. It was Mr. Pascoe, no doubt. He looked pale, but he breathed. She closed her eyes and offered up a brief prayer of gratitude.

Someone had stripped off his shirt and padded his shoulder with linen. She had heard all the Ives were of naturally dark complexion. This one certainly did not bear the usual English fairness. His chest was well muscled and slightly furred by black hair. He lay still as a stone.

Noting only a thin spot of blood on the bandage, she swallowed hard and started with examining his head to see why he did not regain consciousness. His hair was thick and almost silky in texture. Remembering how he'd tousled it last night, she deliberately opened her inner vision to shut out reality.

His aura pulsed less blindingly than when he was alert. That was to be expected. The colors were quieter, less intense, and she could even see a slight vein of blue—the Malcolm part of him that he probably denied. If she understood Aster's explanation, Mr. Pascoe was one generation closer than his nephews to the gifted Ninian Malcolm who had given the current Ives their instincts.

Seeing nothing medically dangerous in his aura, Bridey shuttered her inner vision again, fearing it was too much an invasion of privacy. Someone with that much red in their aura wasn't exactly a private person, but that didn't mean she should be snooping.

She found the very large knot on his thick skull where he'd hit his head. He groaned and pulled away when she inspected it. If she believed his aura, it wasn't a life-threatening blow.

Fin crept in and asked anxiously, "Will he live?"

"Do you want him to?" she asked dryly. "If they actually burnt the foundry, you might wish otherwise. If anyone learns who he is, you're facing charges of insurrection."

"Oscar had them running the furnace all day and night," he murmured, watching as she worked. "The boiler cannot withstand that amount of pressure. It was just a matter of time before it exploded

with men in the room. They just arranged for it to happen after everyone walked out. I don't think Gus meant to shoot anyone. He was just scared."

"Oh, if Gus raised a gun, he meant to shoot him, all right." Bridey pried at the bandage to examine the wound. Her patient tossed with his usual impatience. "Gus is a good shot. What he didn't mean to do was knock Mr. Pascoe off his horse. Gus doesn't think things through."

"He'll be all right, though, won't he? Now that you're here, maybe you can talk to Lord Carstairs."

"One does not speak with maggots," she countered angrily. "Emigrate. Find work elsewhere. Leave the earl on his own until he runs through George's money and blows out his brains, if he has the wits to know how. Reasoning with him won't happen, and you've just shot the one man who might have helped you." Having peeled off the linen bandage, Bridey examined the still open wound on her unconscious patient's shoulder. "The bullet is still in here."

Fin grimaced, knowing what that meant. "I'll fetch Mrs. Mac."

"She's old, Fin. She can't hold men down anymore. He's likely to wake up screaming. Learn the price of violence." Sometimes, coldness suited her. Had she been a man, Fin would be shivering in his shoes right now and would jump to do as ordered. For her, he grudgingly stalked to the far side of the cot.

The patient under her hands suddenly grew still. Not fooled, Bridey pinched his upper arm. "You want Fin to remove the bullet?" she asked maliciously. "He knows how."

"Ow, you vicious wench." Pascoe's lids flew open, revealing eyes so deep a blue that they appeared black. His glare was evocative, and she almost grinned.

"How far is Edinburgh?" Pascoe asked. "I'd prefer a real physician."

"Bridey is a real physician," Fin answered with brotherly indignation. "She's as good as grandda ever was, probably better."

Her patient didn't bother turning his no-doubt aching head in Fin's direction. He narrowed his eyes at Bridey. "You've dug out balls before?"

"A time or two. Fists are the usual choice of weapon here. Pistols are expensive and balls aren't to be wasted. But drink and weapons go hand in hand. I can do it. You've only muscle to damage here, although there might be bone chips if Gus was close enough."

Bridey opened her bag and began removing her surgical instruments. Watching grown men blanch when she did this provided wicked satisfaction. Fin looked as if he might faint.

Mr. Aaron Pascoe Ives merely watched her with fascination as she poured boiling water into a clean basin and dropped in the scalpel and

ball remover. There were those who would have her arrested for using the instruments allowed only to licensed physicians.

"I've seen surgeons sometimes use whiskey," Mr. Pascoe said conversationally. "I don't suppose you have some on hand?"

"I've seen surgeons *drink* the whiskey," Bridey retorted. "Few bother using it to clean anything." She produced a small bottle from her bag. "Grandfather said cleaning is a terrible waste of good Scotch when boiling water works as well."

She handed him the bottle. He took a large gulp, spluttered, then passed it to Fin. "Here. This stuff will rub your insides raw. I think you need it more than I do. I'll just close my eyes."

And pass out again. She admired his bravado, but pain was pain. No one escaped it.

Pascoe grimaced as she cleaned off his shoulder with lye soap. Steeling herself, she picked up the scalpel. "Hold him," she told her brother.

Fin grabbed Pascoe's good shoulder and placed his hand on his chest, preventing their patient from lunging off the bed when she dug into the wound. She could hear teeth gritting as the tongs struck the ball.

It was done in minutes. Her patient mercifully passed out as expected. Looking white, Fin cleaned up while she sewed the wound. He knew the routine as well as she did. He lifted Pascoe when she needed to wrap the bandage.

"You'll have to take him to the manor," she said as she applied packing to staunch the bleeding. "I'll be returning to Wystan in the morning, and Mrs. Mac can't look after him."

A hand grabbed her wrist. "You stay."

Bridey stared in amazement at the man grasping her with his good hand. He had the strength of two men, even though he should be weak as a baby right now.

"Any idiot can watch for signs of infection," she argued. "I can't stay here. They'll be setting fire to Fin's home next, if only to burn the witch."

"Bring me a musket and I can shoot anyone who dares try." He had his eyes closed against the pain, but there was nothing weak about the clamped muscles of his jaw.

"You'll be more comfortable at the manor." Bridey regarded him with dismay.

"They'll likely poison me at the manor. There's a rotten stink out there that isn't just avarice. Tell them they shot the wrong man, that I'm here to buy iron for a shipping company while scouting for a canal. You can make it work."

A rotten stink? What did that mean?

His grip on her wrist loosened, and he passed out again, leaving her with an enormous dilemma.

Poison him? He thought someone really wanted to kill him?

Fin's eyes widened, and he cursed as he apparently wondered the same things.

CHAPTER 6

PASCOE WOKE to a snore that wasn't his own. Trained since childhood in his zoo of a home to monitor his circumstances before reacting, he lay still. He was accustomed to waking in strange beds, so that didn't disturb him. Faint light spilled through his eyelids. He thought his last memory had been of evening, when a beautiful countess had cut into his shoulder and spilled blood over her slender fingers.

Bloodthirsty wench. He shifted his shoulder and bit back a moan.

Before he could react more, a gentle hand held him back. "Don't move yet. Let me fetch some pain powders."

"No laudanum," he grumbled. Guessing the presence of the countess meant he was safe, he used his good hand to sit up against the pillows.

"You're not hurting enough for laudanum," she agreed. "This is a mild herbal sedative. I need to check the wound for signs of infection."

Another snore erupted, and he had to pry open his eyes to find the source. Lying in a patch of sunlight from the high window, two giant, shaggy creatures sprawled, snoring worse than drunks. Apparently she'd left deerhounds to guard him overnight.

He took the glass of water and powder the lady handed him and gagged it all down. They didn't taste as bad as the raw whiskey she'd given him last night. "I thought you were leaving me in the talented hands of your brother."

"I wondered how much you remembered." She smelled of lye and gardenias as she bent over him.

He peered from beneath lowered lids to admire a proud prow draped in simple muslin. Lady Carstairs might play the part of grand dragon, but she was still young, and her breasts were high and firm, curving to a proportionately smaller waist and wide hips.

If his head and shoulder didn't hurt so damned much. . . He winced and closed his eyes again. It was a devilish good thing he had a painful reminder of their disparate status. "You didn't tell me you had a brother living here. You could have sent me to him for information."

"My brother is a mechanical genius who could make his fortune anywhere else in the world. I don't want him involved," she said angrily. "He deserves better than superstition and being judged by

wealth and title. He would be highly respected in America.”

He heard the bitterness but didn’t understand the source. “The brother of a countess must have name and rank. If this is his house, he has land. *Respect* must be earned in other ways.”

“Titles, pft,” she said with a gesture. “Our grandda was next in line for an earldom. Once, his family owned all this and more. Our name could stand equal to Carstairs and once wielded more power. And then our uncle and parents died. There is nothing for Fin here anymore.”

“I don’t understand. You and your brother did not die.” Pascoe knew he needed information about the mine and furnace, but his head wasn’t prepared for hard facts. Learning about the countess and her family seemed safe enough. Besides, he was intrigued.

“Our uncle—grandda’s eldest—was third in line to the title, but he died at Waterloo, leaving no children. Our mother was grandda’s only other child, and she could not inherit. So after grandda died, the title, an old manor in the Highlands, and what wealth remained went to some distant cousin. It is all senseless.”

“So your grandfather was a viscount and essentially supported himself as a physician because the family fortune had dwindled? And it is for your name that Carstairs married you?” Pascoe grasped her bitterness easily. Marriages of the aristocracy were often based on far less.

“And my charming personality,” she added with a hint of amusement, prying up his eyelid to check his eyes—the ones that were focused on her lovely bosom.

Lacking shame, he grinned. “And to treat his gout. He chose well.”

One of the deerhounds lifted its shaggy head as if listening to distant thunder. With a bound, it leapt to its feet and waited expectantly. A moment later, a knock rapped on the panel. Without waiting, her brother stuck his head in.

“Gus is here, claiming he’s innocent, and I left Maisie down in the cellar, asking for you. Rumor is that Carstairs has sent for an army.”

“I need to dress.” Pascoe glanced pointedly at his satchel and raised his eyebrows at the lady, whose frown would have worked well on a gargoyle. “As lovely as it is being waited on by such beauty, I have a duty to carry out.”

“Gus and Maisie may go hang themselves. Start packing your bags now, Fin,” she ordered, closing her medical bag. “You have no reason to stay here any longer. The blast furnace is destroyed. Carstairs won’t know how to rebuild it. Your responsibility is over.”

The countess turned her fierce glare on Pascoe. “*You* are to stay in bed until you’ve recovered from blood loss, and we are certain the

blow to your head caused no more harm.”

Smiling, keeping his gaze steadily on the irate lady, Pascoe swung his legs—his bare legs—over the side of the bed, holding a sheet across his middle. “Mr. Finley, fetch my bag, would you, please? If Gus is our shooter, I’ll speak with him once I’m dressed.”

She glared instead of flinching at his crudeness. “I’m no stranger to naked men,” she informed him. “But if you’re intent on killing yourself, I’ll ride back to Wystan and start looking for a home for your children.”

“I’ll not kill myself by getting dressed. And my family will look after my children. Not well, perhaps, but they won’t go hungry. I don’t think it’s much of a risk for me to speak with this Gus person. Did your husband always obey your nagging?” Pascoe stood, and her gangly, wide-eyed brother hastened to bring his satchel to the bed.

“Carstairs *liked* being told what to do,” her brother said with laughter. “He never had a thought of his own.”

“I’ll be returning to Wystan then.” Stiff-backed, the countess marched for the door.

“Lady Carstairs, wait,” Pascoe called. “The king *will* send an army if Carstairs asks. The soldiers in Wales destroyed homes and shops and killed innocent citizens. I want to prevent that.”

She narrowed her eyes. “How?”

“Did you bring pigeons back from Wystan and tell Theo to watch for their return?” he asked, digging through his clothes for something suitable.

“I did, although I’m not certain he sees anything except his stars.”

“Let me send a message for Ashford. Theo can see it reaches him before anything Carstairs will have the wits to write. Ashford can prevent any rash action.”

“The marquess of Ashford, your nephew?” she inquired politely. “The nearly blind one?”

Pascoe turned a look of exasperation to her brother, who had quit grinning at the mention of armies. “Is she always this disagreeable?”

“Only lately—with good reason,” he hastened to add at his sister’s glare.

“We’ll get to the bottom of the witch foolishness next, but first, the pigeon, please. I’ll need pen and paper.” Pascoe waited expectantly.

The countess walked out without a word. Malleable and patient, she was not.



WITHOUT HER LOYALTY to the village, Bridey was untethered. She had been

enjoying her freedom to explore a school for midwives without repercussions to anyone but her.

But Fin and Mrs. Mac would suffer if an army marched in here.

She sent Mrs. Mac's youngest grandchild back to the infirmary with pen and paper. Fin could prepare the pigeon.

Gus wasn't anywhere in sight, so Fin must have stored him in the small office. Bridey headed for her grandfather's workshop—the cattle cellar of the old tower. She knew what Maisie wanted. She was just angry enough to confront the woman she'd thought of as friend.

The upper level of the old tower was once the living area for the entire household. These days, the drafty walls, slotted windows, and buckled wooden floor made it largely uninhabitable. She and Mrs. Mac used it for storage and as a drying room for herbs and vegetables.

Bridey took down the herbs Maisie needed, ground them with her pestle, and dropped them into a cloth pouch. Then taking the worn stone steps down, she found her ex-friend pacing the dirt floor of the workshop.

At one time Maisie had been the cheerful, spoiled daughter of the village's mercantile. Then she had fallen in love with a handsome foundry worker. Exhaustion lined her once pretty face as she watched Bridey come down the stairs.

"I was afraid you wouldn't see me," she said, sounding wary.

"I almost didn't." Bridey didn't see any point in being less than blunt, although observing Maisie's near-skeletal frame caused her to drop her shield of sarcasm—which revealed her hurt. "I don't know why you would wish to have dealings with a witch."

"It would have cost Jack his position for me to defend you. You should have understood that," Maisie said wearily. "You had choices. We didn't."

"No, I didn't understand that." Perhaps she should have, but she still didn't grasp all the changes that had happened over this past year. "I thought if the people I'd known and loved all my life stood up for me, Carstairs could do nothing."

Maisie shook her head. "Mr. Darrow brought in Irishmen who owe no loyalty to anyone but him. He looks for excuses to let the experienced laborers go."

Oscar Darrow—the new earl's brother, the foundry manager, and a bully. Should she have known more than that?

"They shut me out of the operations once Gilroy took over," Bridey said. "I knew they'd brought in Irishmen, but I thought that was because we didn't have enough labor to expand the foundry. Fin should have told me."

"It's not as if any would complain to your poor brother," Maisie said with a little more of her old spirit. "He had his hands full fighting

with Mr. Darrow every hour of every day. You were expendable. He was not," she said sadly, accepting the herb pouch Bridey gave her. "I haven't the coin to pay you, but we can't afford more babies. I'll ask my father to extend Mrs. Mac's credit at the store. Jack still won't take Da's money, not that there's much of it anymore. Da is talking about selling the store to the earl."

Mind whirling with this new perspective of the events that had sent her to Wystan, Bridey still caught the implications of the only mercantile in town going to Carstairs. She reacted in horror. "Don't let him do that! If your father wishes to sell, let me find someone else. Carstairs will own everyone in town if he can charge what he likes at the store."

Maisie's eyes widened. "He would *raise* prices when we can't afford most of the merchandise on the wages they're paying now?"

"Of course he would. You have to put clothes on your baby's back and flour in your bread and where else would you buy them? Jack wouldn't be able to quit once you run up credit for goods you can't afford. He'll be working longer hours to pay the bills. I've heard how it happens." Bridey paced as she worried at the problem. She stopped at her grandfather's workbench, rubbed the old wood, and wished he was still alive to bluster and foam and cut Gilroy off at the knees.

"I'll tell Da," Maisie said. "But he's tired and without Mama to help him, he wants to just putter in his garden. I don't know how you will find someone who would want a store that exists mostly on credit these days."

Bridey hesitated, unwilling to make a commitment to a place that no longer welcomed her. But she'd spent an entire lifetime helping, and she couldn't seem to break the habit. "You could run it for him, couldn't you? You used to help him all the time."

Maisie gestured with the pouch and shrugged. "Maybe. I thank you for this. I've been denying Jack our bed these last months. It's been a strain. If you leave again, where will I find the herbs?"

"I cannot stay," Bridey said, a little more gently than she might have earlier. For years, she had envied her friend's fecundity, until Maisie had started losing the children she bore far too quickly. "But if there is any profit to be made at all in the mercantile, perhaps you will be a little better off."

"Jack won't like it. But with the furnace closed. . . He may have no choice. You're wise to leave, Bridey. You don't belong here." With that, Maisie hurried out the open door.

Jack wouldn't like it. . . . Bridey shook her head and headed back up the stairs. Why did men have all the control in the world and so little in their brainpans for doing it right?

Upstairs, she heard Gus shouting like a wounded bear. "I didn't

shoot at you, I swear, I didn't do it! It was that sneaky Darrow!"

And just like that, pieces of the puzzle started falling together.

CHAPTER 7

PASCOE WAS LISTENING to Angus Turnbull's tale of innocence when the countess stormed into the paneled study. Garbed in simple green wool with a starched white apron to cover her lovely bosom, she didn't look like jaded nobility or even a frost queen. The lady's green eyes glittered like hard gem stones, and rage colored her high cheekbones. He rather enjoyed this heated sight of her—if her fury wasn't for him.

He stood to acknowledge her presence and waited for the tirade.

In a flurry of petticoats, she turned on the bear of a man standing, hat in hand, in front of the desk. "Has Darrow hired more guards?" she demanded.

Pascoe raised his eyebrows at this interesting approach and waited. In his experience, listening tended to be more productive than demanding, but men like Angus reacted differently to ladies.

"He has guards at all the gates," Mr. Turnbull confirmed. "Armed with four-pounders, too. Can't nobody pass without a paper from him."

Lady Carstairs swung to place her hands on the desk in front of Pascoe. Her expression was furious. "Gus never lies, so if he says he's innocent, he is. The guards, gates, and guns are new. Who petitioned the king—Carstairs?"

"I don't know, my lady. I am a simple merchant, apparently caught in the crossfire." Pascoe distanced himself from her ire—and his attraction—by pointing out the difference in their standing and reminding her of his disguise. "I believe I'll tell my employer to look elsewhere for his iron."

He glanced at the bear of a man he'd seen in the mob when he'd first rode into town. "Mr. Turnbull, if the lady pleads your innocence, I shall believe her. Thank you for clarifying the situation."

Turnbull bowed out, with Mr. Finley escorting him, although the brother cast a glance over his shoulder before he closed the door. Pascoe nodded at him in assurance. They had gone long past society's strictures about men and women and closed doors.

"No one in their right mind will believe you're a flunky," the lady said with scorn, sweeping around the room in agitation. "And with Oscar Darrow, it really won't matter. If he perceives you as a danger, he may have been the one who tried to eliminate you."

Pascoe's eyebrows nearly flew off his face at this leap of

judgment. "And you have determined this how? And will you please sit so I may? My head is not quite up to all this yet."

She scowled and gracelessly plopped down in a chair near the cold grate. Fury had melted her icy shield, apparently. "It is too soon to take more of the powders. You need to be in bed."

"While men wish to kill me for no good reason? I think not. I take it you have learned something I should know?" Pascoe buttoned his waistcoat as he sat down. He'd not dressed the part of gentleman, in part for masquerade and in part because his damned shoulder hurt too much for tight tailoring.

"Oscar Darrow is Lord Carstairs' *heir*," she said with finality, as if that explained all.

Which it probably did, if he knew more of the situation. "The Brothers Darrow are not much older than I am, I thought." He pried for more information by feigning nonchalance. "There's time enough for heirs."

"Carstairs is much like his late uncle was, easily led by the nose," she said with withering scorn. "But he's young enough to like playing the wealthy earl, cutting a swathe through Edinburgh society. He does not stay here much unless it's hunting season."

"So he was happy to leave you handling the domestic side of the estate?" Pascoe suggested.

"He certainly couldn't do it, and as I said, he's lazy. This is my home, so I have an obligation to the people here." Her lips straightened in a grim line, as if she bit back more.

Pascoe had lived on the edges of aristocracy all his life. Comely widows who needed a home were generally considered fair prey for bored, privileged idiots. He was already furious enough about being shot, but for the sake of a lady, he would act on his fury. He couldn't hold back his worst suspicions. "I don't suppose he also showed an inclination to have you in his bed?" he asked sharply.

As she sought a judicious reply, his anger multiplied. The Darrows might be the king's godsons, but it was becoming clear that they were a despicable example of the worst the aristocracy had to offer. He would not go so far as to believe Darrow a murderer, but there were many reasons to try to scare away a king's man.

"I am not a timid maiden. I made it very clear from the first that I was in mourning, and marriage was the only way into my bed." The lady's lovely, dark-lashed eyes widened, as if she was apparently just seeing a new angle to an old story. "Carstairs seemed to accept my terms, as long as I ran the household—until I complained too much about his brother's changes at the mine and foundry. My relationship with the earl deteriorated the more Darrow established his repellant practices."

“Setting the brothers against each other didn’t help, admittedly,” Pascoe said, shoveling his anger down the hatch so he could think clearly. “Now take your thought one step farther. If Oscar Darrow knows his older brother well, he might also have feared Carstairs taking the path of least resistance, which might be marrying you just to take care of his house and business. That made *you* a threat not only to Darrow’s position at the foundry, but to his eventual inheritance of the title.”

“*Me?*” She looked stunned. Pascoe rather enjoyed surprising her. . . and the fact that she was a quick study.

“I was never really a threat,” she said, considering this notion. “I’d married once for duty, thinking I would have the opportunity to raise children who would respect the village and their inheritance. But I was never blessed with a child that came to term. By the time George died, I’d learned my lesson. I had no intention of living my last forty or fifty years with another stupid, lazy man. But something Maisie said this morning. . .”

Pascoe contemplated wringing the necks of all the stupid men in her life who hadn’t appreciated her beauty and wisdom, but her husband was already dead. That left the king’s damned godsons. He ought to at least try to be objective about men he had yet to meet, but he was having difficulty.

“Maisie said her husband would have lost his position at the foundry if she’d supported me when the rumors started flying. That reeks of Darrow’s threats, not Carstairs.”

“The witch rumor! He started the rumor that turned the villagers against you!” Pascoe developed a deadly urge to hunt down the king’s damned godson and kick him down a mountainside. “Darrow saw you as a threat to his inheritance and found an easy way of removing you. The man isn’t a complete dunce, but a real bastard, and I don’t say that lightly given I am one.”

“If he were a bastard, then he wouldn’t be a problem,” she said with grim humor. “But that’s it, exactly. The rumor started with poor Peg, whose baby was born too early and with its heart outside its chest. There was absolutely nothing any physician could have done differently. Her husband was one of the new men Oscar brought in. They let him keep poor Peg’s cottage after she died.”

Pascoe bit his tongue on a stream of invectives. “So for the sake of his house and his situation, her husband probably took his boss’s suggestion that you were at fault.”

“Superstitious, uneducated Irishman—he didn’t know me and probably believed Darrow. None of the newcomers had reason to trust me as the rest of the village did. So they picked up on the rumor quickly. And then my. . . friends. . .” She sighed in despair. “They

were never my friends, were they?”

“You’ll know which ones are by the time this is over, but people have to think of themselves and their families first. It’s human nature.” Pascoe wished his throbbing shoulder didn’t have him feeling like a damp rag right now. He wanted to pound faces.

But the king employed him for his brains and tact, not his fists. This morass might take more of both than he possessed.

He wished he had the right to console the lovely countess, who looked as if her heart had been broken all over again. He was starting to understand that the frost queen veneer was just for show, that she hid herself even better than he did.

But a countess was far out of his limited reach, and no matter how much he might desire her, she was not in his plans for the future. He could, however, attempt to give her back the life she wanted. “Are there any others in the village you can trust? Have your brother send them up so I can talk to them. I would like to resolve this problem without violence, if possible.”

Any evidence of her unhappiness disappeared as she drew herself up to her usual haughty self. “I will send him to you. I must return to Wystan.”

He didn’t want her returning to Wystan. All the more reason he should let her go.



TELLING herself she couldn’t leave until she could assure Lord Theo that Mr. Pascoe would fully recover, Bridey spent the next few hours grinding herbs and replenishing her supplies. She’d been told Aster’s cousin Emilia was a scholarly herbalist. If the duke was not interested in the midwife’s school she hoped he’d fund, she could go to London after the babies were born and meet Emilia. The world was far larger than Northbridge now that she was no longer confined here by duty.

She was examining her neglected herb garden when she heard the rattle of cart wheels and the plodding of a pony up the hill. Still trusting no one, she stepped behind an overgrown rhododendron and pushed aside branches to peer through—and nearly gasped in shock.

Grabbing her skirt, Bridey ran down to the road to greet the cart. “Have you run mad? Whatever possessed you to bring two small children up here without their nursemaid?”

The twins sat perched on the cart seat, studying their surroundings as if they were experienced world travelers. At sight of her, they giggled and beamed as if they’d accomplished wonders—which they had. Impossible, tragedy-defying miracles.

The cart driver, a young boy, looked unrepentant. “They was

wandering the woods alone. I couldn't leave them there."

Bridey thought she might faint, if only from lack of air at the sheer audacity of the brats. "In the woods?" she asked, remembering one short stretch of the road on an untouched hillside—easily a mile or more from the Wystan tower.

"It's a long hike for babes," the driver said accusingly. "It was a miracle I was coming this way. Are they yor'n?"

"I know them." Recovering herself somewhat, she lifted Emma down. She wanted to rage and scream, but the driver really couldn't be faulted. "Come in and let us reward you for your trouble. We thank you for finding them, although they should have told you where they belonged. I have no notion of how they told you to come here."

The boy shrugged and handed down Edward. "They seemed to remember the way fine enough. They said this was where their da was."

If even she, with her acceptance of the wyrd, had difficulty grasping how they'd accomplished this clear impossibility, Bridey would like to see Mr. Pascoe's face when she informed him of it. The excuse to see her patient actually lifted her spirits, if somewhat maliciously. She couldn't wait to hear how Mr. Pascoe would explain away children, who had never left London, knowing how to find the remote village where he currently resided. And *why*?

"Come inside. Mrs. Mac will have pasties, and their father will certainly reward you." *If she had to beat Mr. Pascoe over the head with a big stick.* She shuddered at all the possible horrors the children could have suffered—if they didn't have a guardian angel hovering over them.

Taking the now-silent twins by their hands, Bridey led the way up the stone steps that had been built into the side of the hill to connect to what grandda called the "new" house. There was no servant's entrance in a house like this, unless she wished to tell the driver to take the crumbling tower stairs. Fortresses weren't meant to have many entrances.

As they entered the timbered front door, she heard a man who wasn't her patient talking in the study. Mr. Pascoe tended to listen more than speak, she'd noticed. But she was certain he was in there.

Mrs. Mac rushed to greet them, drying her hands in her apron. "My heavens, who are these lovelies? Are you hungry dears?" She looked at the cart driver and wisely recognized there was no relation between the finely garbed children and the rough boy. "And you, too, young man. You look as if you could use a good pasty. Come along with me."

"I'll bring the children down shortly. Give me a moment." Bridey held two chubby hands firmly, although they'd begun to squirm and

looked longingly after Mrs. Mac and their driver.

“If you are old enough to set out on your own, with no nursemaid, and telling no one, then you are old enough to take responsibility for your actions,” she said in warning. “You can explain to your father how you performed this marvel.”

Now they looked alarmed, but glancing at each other, they shook their dark curls and assumed their angelic appearance. Bridey refrained from opening her extra eye in this ancient house—possession was a reality she lived with—but she wagered a pink aura hovered nearby.

“Knock on the study door, Edward,” she ordered.

The boy did as told. It was easy to see why everyone thought the children adorable and well-behaved.

When the voices behind the door simply grew louder, Bridey nodded at Emma. “Use the latch, please.”

Emma’s glance was a little more worried, but the child obediently pulled the ancient latch. The heavy door swung on its leather hinges.

Eventually, the two men inside noticed and silenced. Pascoe stood up. His visitor was already standing. The line above Mr. Pascoe’s nose deepened at their entrance.

“Mr. Jones, thank you for speaking with me. If I need more, I’ll let you know.” Pascoe dismissed the foundry worker.

Bridey would like to know how he was disguising his presence as a merchant by interviewing laborers, but she was more interested in his reaction to the arrival of the twins.

He seemed stunned. After Mr. Jones tipped his hat and left, the silver-tongued diplomat simply stared at his offspring. While she waited, she tried to imagine the curses and shouts of rage he visibly bit back—because even an oblivious Ives had to know what the twins had done was *not normal*.

The twins began to squirm again. Bridey wouldn’t release them. “Are your children in the habit of traveling for hours on their own, Mr. Pascoe?”

He sighed, shoved his hand through his hair, and winced when he hit the sore spot. “Not to my knowledge. Do I want to know how they arrived here?”

“Not by pigeon,” Bridey said with acidity. She set Edward free. “Make your bows and tell your father how you came to be here.”

The boy shot her a worried look, glanced at his sister, then stepped forward to make his bow. “Mama said you needed us.”

Bridey waited to see how their father accepted that.

He rubbed his jaw. Even though he’d been freshly shaved earlier, Pascoe’s stubble darkened the sharp planes of his face. She knew he wasn’t a stupid man. He’d had four years to accept that his children

weren't normal. He still appeared confounded. He glanced at her in silent appeal. "Their mother is quite dead. I was at the funeral."

She nodded acknowledgement. More because she was fascinated than to help her obtuse patient, she asked of the twins, "Did your mother tell you how to find your father?"

Emma nodded eagerly. Edward shifted from foot to foot.

"How did you know the boy and the cart would be driving this way?" Bridey phrased a question requiring words.

"Molly in the kitchen," Edward replied obediently. "He comes to visit her."

Pascoe still looked confused. "So Molly had her friend bring you to me?"

Both children shook their heads.

Bridey almost had to smile. "They've been taught to be seen and not heard. They're trying very hard to not speak. Ask a question requiring words."

He shot her an unappreciative glare, rubbed his probably aching head, and tried again. "So how did you find Molly's friend?"

"Mama said to walk past the trees," Emma offered.

"He would have taken them back to Wistan if he'd known that was where they were from," Bridey explained. She shouldn't be amused. She knew they had done a dangerous thing. But their overly-confident father's confusion was so wonderful to watch. Obviously, he wasn't accepting that they talked to ghosts. "So they walked the mile from Wistan north to the road where trees line the hillside. What did you tell the boy?"

Edward responded. "We told him we needed to see our papa. We're hungry now. Can we go eat?"

Bridey had to consider her patient's pain and quit tormenting him. "I'll take you down to Mrs. Mac, but you mustn't leave her sight, do you understand? It doesn't matter what your mama tells you. You must *not* leave the kitchen until I or your father comes to get you."

Not giving her stunned patient a second look, she marched them down to the kitchen. When she returned to the study, she found Mr. Pascoe sprawled on the sagging sofa with his arm over his eyes.

"Hand me the pain powder and then tell me if I'm losing my mind," he said in what sounded like both pain and anger.

She didn't take commands lightly, but she wouldn't argue with a patient who was obviously hurting. She offered him a glass of water and the powder, then took a seat so he didn't feel obligated to stand. That the polished diplomat had neglected his usual decorum by not standing when she'd entered revealed the extent of his confusion. She ought to sympathize, but he'd had four years to determine the children's eccentricities, and *he hadn't*. He had not even realized how

seriously *different* his children were.

"I can see why you have difficulty keeping nurses," she said. "Do they generally leave when you're not home?"

"Always," he said with a sigh, sitting up against a pillow to gulp the water. "And I'm not following any of this. Does this mean you understand what they do?"

"Not exactly, but I'm a little more open-minded than most nannies. I'd say the children have been doing whatever it takes to bring you home. Tormenting nurses is one way of doing so, but that is most likely only recent."

He frowned and nodded. "I can almost make sense of that. I cannot tell you how many times I've had to come rushing home after the housekeeper sent me frantic messages that the nursemaids have all quit. But this is a pattern that has gone on far longer than just recently."

"Their behavior is not normal," Bridey agreed. "They must have learned that superstitious nursemaids would leave rather than try to explain how their charges kept vanishing. Do you believe that the new marchioness of Ashford hears your ancestors in her mind?"

He narrowed his eyes and glared. "Do not blame the bad behavior of my children on Malcolm enchantments, please."

Knowing she didn't have to please anyone but herself and certainly not this man who needed to take his children and go home, Bridey responded with a hint of spite. "Then I shall not tell you that I see what is most likely their mother hovering over them. . . and over you, when you're with them. You may call her a guardian angel, if you like, but I suspect a strong streak of determination. It's your choice what you make of that, but I say they're listening to a ghost. And maybe talking because of one."

She rose and walked out.

CHAPTER 8

THE TWINS HEARD the *ghost* of their mother?

The frost queen *saw* their mother? She saw ghosts?

The children had started talking because of a ghost?

Pascoe's head pounded, his shoulder ached, and his late wife might be haunting his children. He'd sooner comprehend Theo's mathematics than phantoms. He didn't know whether to be relieved or worried that the children had begun to talk because of a ghost—which was patently irrational.

More understandable was that the frost queen countess was a crazed Malcolm. He'd known that. He'd apparently assumed frost queens didn't have eccentricities. Stupid of him. He must be growing soft. He should probably retire—at the grand age of thirty-three.

Just imagining what the obnoxious marquess of Ashford would say to that had Pascoe struggling to sit up again. Ashford was the same age. The kingdom would probably fall into turmoil and rebellion without Ashford pushing for election reform. Wealth and power required high levels of responsibility. Pascoe couldn't quit, even in the face of growing insanity.

How could he believe his children talked to ghosts and remain coherent? Uneducated peasants might believe in superstition and magic, but not logical, practical gentlemen like himself.

If only he could teach the damned new earl of Carstairs about duty, he could go home and contemplate going quietly mad. Of course, he was a bit presumptuous in thinking he could teach anyone anything if he couldn't deal with his own children. Very demeaning to realize he couldn't manage two small children—how could he believe he could manage a titled idiot and his bully of a brother?

Pascoe winced and covered his eyes again.

The countess's brother arrived to study him worriedly. "Are you all right? Do I need to fetch Bridey?"

"There's a reason they call your sister a witch, and it has nothing to do with magic potions," Pascoe grumbled, dragging himself from the uncomfortable sofa and wondering what the hell he would do with the twins in this nightmare.

"Bridey had to learn to be tough because Carstairs wasn't," her brother said with a shrug. "That's not easy for a woman."

"I'd wager your sister was *born* with teeth, sharp ones. You owe

her no sympathy.” Pascoe groped his way through his headache to the desk. He didn’t comprehend ghosts, but he understood duty. “Jones essentially agreed with what you said—the men over-filled a worn-out furnace, walked out, and let it burn. They’ve rendered the foundry inoperable for the time being. How long will it take to rebuild?”

Fin Finley set his jaw as stubbornly as his sister. “I won’t, not while Oscar Darrow is in charge.”

Pascoe nodded. “Then all Carstairs will have is the mine. What if you built the furnace elsewhere?”

“Transporting both coal and iron ore will increase the price. We’ll need financial backing, land, access to easy transportation. . . .”

“All of which you have here, understood. I’m simply looking for possibilities for now. I can’t shoot Darrow, and I can’t expect Carstairs to boot out his own brother.”

Finley grimaced. “Bridey may be right. I should just emigrate to the Americas. But the engineers in Edinburgh are the best to be had. They’re already creating improvements to the design. There is too much new expertise required in too many fields. More minds than mine are needed to pull this together.”

“I cannot tell the king that his godsons are a brute and an idiot, without offering a solution. I may need to visit Carstairs next.” Pascoe hated saying that. He didn’t think his pounding head could tolerate the ride to Edinburgh much less dealing with a nodcock.

And then he’d have to think of the twins trying to follow him to the city. . . . He shuddered.

Their mother had been a determined free spirit who would have encouraged them to do just as they had—follow him to hell and back. How could Bridey know that?

“The earl has a party arriving this evening,” Finley said, unaware of Pascoe’s meandering thoughts. “There’s rumor he may be entertaining an heiress.”

“If we’re fortunate, the simpleton isn’t as simple as he seems. Perhaps he means to put a damper on his brother’s expectations. I don’t suppose you could contrive an invitation?”

Finley shrugged. “Most likely not. Bridey didn’t leave quietly. And he barely acknowledges my existence.”

Pascoe allowed himself a smile at the image of the frost queen not leaving quietly. He wished he could have been there. “Thank you, Mr. Finley. You’ve been extremely helpful.”

“Fin, sir. I’m just Fin around here. I’ve received an acknowledgement from Lord Theo that he received your message.” The young man opened the study door. “Are there any other messages or shall I send Bridey to you?”

“Thank you. You might want to let Theo know the twins have

arrived safely. And I imagine your sister means for me to come to her. It's not as if I can expect her to act as nursemaid for my children." With a sigh, Pascoe shoved to his feet.

Finley frowned his puzzlement but headed off on his errand.

Wearing his old tweed jacket, unstarched linen at his throat, and not bothering with his handsome but unnecessary walking stick, Pascoe stalked through the ancient hall that the countess called home, searching for a passage to the kitchen.

He'd been raised at Iveston, a sprawling castle with modern conveniences mixed with eccentric neglect, dozens of hounds, and Pascoe's male relations and their friends wreaking havoc. He'd sought his own home as soon as he was able. Neat and orderly appealed to him.

The Finley home was neat, but spoke of decades, if not centuries, of heavy use. Smoke blackened the walls. What upholstery survived was threadbare. The wooden floor was cupped and scarred from the tread of many boots. But no cobwebs or dust marred the polished tables and shelves.

He followed voices down a stone passage and entered the high-ceilinged kitchen. His children sat at a trestle table, nibbling enormous meat pasties and watching the adults with too-wise eyes.

And the countess thought *Lily* hovered over them? Pascoe could just about, almost, imagine that. Lily hadn't want to let go of life and her children. She'd lingered as long as she could, wasting away from the lung disease that had eventually claimed her.

The old, familiar pain had lost its sharp edges, but it lurked.

The children lifted their heads to watch him warily.

He had no notion of what to say to the progeny to whom he'd dedicated his life. Or to the lady waiting expectantly for wisdom from a man who consulted with kings.

Pascoe twitched with a sudden understanding of how the mighty Ashford must have felt when rendered helpless by his blindness. Feeling blind as well as deaf to whatever his children saw or heard, Pascoe took a kitchen chair and accepted the platter and mug the cook placed in front of him.

He'd never been less hungry in his life. He didn't want to accept ghosts, much less Lily being one. Swallowing hard, he asked reluctantly, feeling like a lack-wit as he did so, "Does your mother say why you must accompany me?"

Two sets of Lily-blue eyes watched him with solemnity. Edward was the one who answered. "Mama can only be in one place at a time." He sounded as if he spoke by rote.

That was one of Lily's favorite phrases. Pascoe rubbed his brow and sipped his ale. "Are they possessed?" he asked the countess.

"I am not a medium," she retorted. "I studied medical science, not metaphysics. I am aware of the existence of spirits. I tend to shut them out because they are not always—lucid. I doubt the children have that capacity."

Pascoe watched the plump cook bustle around the kitchen, ignoring this improbable conversation as if *spirits* were just another word for Irishmen. He could almost believe he'd walked through a veil into a different dimension of the world as he knew it.

"It cannot be possible to speak with the dead," he said, trying to convince himself.

"I don't believe anyone is speaking to them," she replied with a decidedly malicious twinkle in her eye that stirred his baser nature.

He wanted to kiss her into submission. And even as he realized that, he also realized that she was not a woman to submit to just any man, which made her immensely appealing. He must have cracked his braincase. A frost queen countess was not only out of his grasp, but even if he was insane enough to pursue her, her defiant nature would likely burn all the bridges he'd so carefully built.

"Now, if you will explain what you wish done with the children," she continued with apparent amusement, "I'll make arrangements. I'll be returning to Wystan in the morning and can take them with me, if that's your preference."

The twins looked alarmed. Thinking insanity was a far more interesting place to be than caught between a rock and a hard place, Pascoe turned to them. "And what would you like to do?"

"Stay with Mama," Emma said. "Stay with you," piped his son.

"One and the same," Lady Carstairs said with a decided smile.

"I cannot take them to the mines and foundry!" Although, if he was willing to accept what the lady and her friends told him about the situation there, perhaps he needn't perform his usual investigation. Still, he needed to at least visit the earl and his brother. "Are they safe here if I ride to the manor tomorrow?"

"Don't ask me. I don't know their mother. How impetuous was she?" Lady Carstairs watched him with interest.

"Very," he said gloomily.

"Mama says to take our new mama with you," Edward said, while his sister watched them all with bright eyes. "We will stay here if you do."

New mama. Pinching the bridge of his nose, Pascoe fell back against his chair and met the countess's confusion with a wicked smile. "They started talking and came to Wystan because they were promised a new mama," he reminded her.

"They think *I* am their new mother? That's ridiculous." She set down her napkin and rose from the table. "Decide if you wish me to

return them to Wystan. By morning, we should know if your wound is healing. I will depart then.”

Pascoe stood. Her head came just above his shoulder, so he couldn't use size to intimidate. Not that this lady was easily daunted. He just knew he needed her if he were to accomplish his task, and he was not a man who gave up, ever. He scowled down at her. “If you will go with me to visit Carstairs, we may settle this matter swiftly. If I have to spend the summer chasing my children, nothing will be resolved. What will one day more hurt?”

“You cannot get in to see Carstairs without an invitation,” she said icily. “And I will certainly not be allowed past the gate.”

“If I obtain the invitation, will you stay?”

She glared. “For both of us? I would pay to see that.”



BRIDEY CAME to regret those words.

She left the twins with their father for the rest of the day while she treated patients who slipped into her grandfather's workshop to ask for help. Old habits died hard. Finleys had doctored the village for generations, and the new earl had not brought in anyone to take Bridey's place. Apparently, *witchcraft* was acceptable if it eased pain, she thought cynically as the last patient escaped into the night.

Realizing how late it had become, she trudged back into the house to find a light still on in the study.

Prepared to scold the stubborn Mr. Pascoe for not resting as ordered, she walked in without knocking.

The king's envoy was sitting at the desk in shirtsleeves, with his daughter sound asleep over his good shoulder. Emma's little hand crumpled his neckcloth, leaving an expanse of broad dark chest exposed. Bridey swallowed a knot in her throat. She'd seen him half-naked, of course. She knew what men looked like. She didn't know why she found this particular man's brown throat so appealing. Perhaps it was the sleeping child. She glanced to the sofa and found Edward tucked on the cushions with his father's coat over him.

“We fixed cots for them,” she whispered when he looked up.

He made a face. “They wouldn't stay. I am almost done here. I'll put them down shortly.”

“One puts down injured horses.” She lifted Emma from his shoulder. The little girl snuggled into her arms with a moist exhalation. “You lost a lot of blood. You need rest.”

Stretching his arms and broad shoulders in relief, he rose and held up a paper for her to read. “An invitation, for me and my guest. I'll rest when I'm done here.”

She studied the document, recognizing Carstairs' stationery and handwriting. It didn't appear forged. "How?" she demanded, her gut roiling in panic.

"The king doesn't send me out unprepared. I had an introduction, of course. His Majesty simply leaves it up to me as to how and when I choose to use it." He crossed the room to lift his son. "Lead on, my lady, and let us tuck the brats in."

"Carstairs will not let *me* in," Bridey insisted as she led the way to the small room prepared for the children. "I cannot imagine how I can be of help even if he did."

The manor rose in her mind as a prison from which there was no escape, a place of humiliation to which she had no desire to return, ever.

"You can tell me more of the situation than if I spent a month studying it. I don't want the twins here longer than necessary, and you can expedite our departure." He deposited Edward on the sheets, straightened his nightshirt, then covered him with his abandoned blanket.

"You will be turned away if you arrive with me," she warned. "Carstairs really was quite apoplectic by the time I left, blaming me for all sorts of impossibilities. You will fare better if I stay with the twins."

He raised his dark eyebrows in the lamplight. "If you wish me to believe in ghosts, then Lily will stay with the twins while their *new* *mama* accompanies me. Do you think spirits see the future?"

Heat rose in her cheeks. Rejecting the idea of being tied down again, Bridey tucked Emma into her bed, then turned down the lamp. "Spirits can't predict futures any more than they can be guardian angels. Our fates are undecided. Ask Aster. For all her stars and charts and gifts, she can only predict *possibilities*. And since I would only agree to be their mama over your dead body, I wouldn't read too much into their chatter."

He snorted and took her elbow. "That's blunt. But since I feel the same, let us agree to end this conflict as quickly as possible so we both may return to our lives."

Not appeased, Bridey shook off his hand and strode back to the main hall. "If I go with you tomorrow and am turned away, I will return to Wystan, where I belong. Decide if you wish me to take the twins with me. From the sounds of it, your dead body is a very real possibility if you intend to interfere with Darrow. Presumably, he has already tried to kill you once."

It made her insides cold to say it, but he had to acknowledge that he was not invulnerable—hence the spirit anxiously hovering.

The hall was too dark to see his expression, but she sensed his

weariness in the way he caressed her cheek. "I have ever been expendable, my dear lady. There are more Ives than leaves on a tree. But the children are precious to me. I will do nothing to harm their future, and that includes dying."

She wanted to believe him, but he was a politician trained to say what was expedient. Even if she longed for a strong, warm hand on her skin, a reassuring voice in her ear, she could not trust him. She brushed his hand away. "Their future will probably be safer in Malcolm hands, anyway."

He chuckled. "The frost queen speaks again. You will go with me on the morrow?"

"Against my better judgement, if only to prove you wrong," she said. "You will tell me if red streaks appear under your bandage? Mrs. Mac knows how to change it."

"I shall take all precautions, my lady. Good night, and thank you." He bowed formally.

Bridey almost curtsied. He was that compelling. Catching herself, she nodded and hurried away, not daring to linger in the path of temptation.

Tomorrow, her duty would be done. Tomorrow, she would return to Wystan and freedom.

CHAPTER 9

THE NEXT DAY did not bring her freedom from duty as Bridey had hoped.

Wearing a boring gray gown from her days as George's wife, she sat in her grandfather's ancient carriage beside the overly-confident gentleman who thought he had the key to the world. Currently, Mr. Pascoe was showing his dubious invitation to the gatekeeper. She glanced around to see if Carstairs had armed guards on the house as well as the mines. She had only been jesting about being barred at the gate, but the new earl had actually hired a genuine *gatekeeper*. She shivered despite the warmth of the June day.

She supposed it would be less humiliating to be refused by a stranger than by the butler who had taken her orders for nearly a decade. Stoically, she waited as the guard studied the invitation. Once they were turned away, she could leave for Wystan with all good conscience, although she despised the idea of retreat now that she was here. Perverse of her.

"Is he keeping the villagers out or the inmates in?" she muttered to hide her agitation.

"Given what I've heard so far, the earl is hiding from his laborers. Does Darrow live here as well?" At the gatekeeper's gesture to continue onward, Pascoe lifted his chiseled jaw with the superiority of an entitled aristocrat and urged his horse into a trot.

Bridey was glad for her gloves or she'd be biting her nails. The gatekeeper hadn't known her identity, she felt sure. The next stop would be the ultimate humiliation, turned away at her own door by those she knew and cared for.

"Darrow has taken over the dower house," she said bitterly. The home that should have been hers.

"Charming. Pinch me every time you see me clench my fists," Mr. Pascoe ordered grimly.

"I should think a diplomat would not need reminding." Frozen in fear as the carriage rolled up the drive, Bridey did not attempt to follow his thoughts.

"Normally, ladies aren't involved in my negotiations." His voice was curt as they drew closer to the towering stone manor. "I care little about mines or arrogant idiots and can twist arms with impunity for a good cause. But I draw a line at mistreating women."

"Then I should possibly restrain you before we enter the door.

Carstairs will not react with pleasantries when he sees me. This is a mistake.”

“He risks the king’s disapproval by insulting either of us. If he wants my help, he must behave. If he is not capable of doing so, then my recommendation to His Majesty will not be to his liking.” Mr. Pascoe imperiously flung the reins to a stableboy at the entrance and climbed down. His stern expression gave way for only a slight wince when he jarred his wounded shoulder.

Struck by the authority this man must wield, Bridey did not argue again. Beneath Mr. Pascoe’s benign and genial appearance lurked a man of great power—in some ways, second only to the king’s. She needed to be as wary as Carstairs in his presence, instead of admiring the elegant cut of his coat.

A footman Bridey recognized as young Forest opened the great front doors before they needed to knock. She thought she saw fleeting relief in the servant’s expression before he straightened it into impassivity.

From inside, a banshee wailed.

Stiffening in fear, Forest gripped the door and inched it toward closure. Bridey waited for it to slam in her face.

Pascoe caught her elbow, kicked the wooden panel open, and dragged her over the threshold. He glanced around with amused interest as the dramatic shrieks escalated. Swinging his walking stick, he raised his monocle. “I say, is that a hound in agony? Does Carstairs keep hounds in his chambers?”

“Not that I’m aware, sir,” Bridey said with a hint of dryness. “I believe that is the castle ghost greeting my return.”

He cast her an amused look that said he’d demand explanations later, then pinned the footman with a steely gaze. “I believe it would be proper to lead us to his lordship?”

Bridey clutched his coat sleeve. Humiliation in front of guests would be the ultimate agony, but she wasn’t backing down now.



TRAVERSING the Georgian hall of the manor, Pascoe admired the lady’s exotic gardenia scent. It soothed his roiling soul as he studied the lair of the cods-head who had forced him to travel to this outpost of nowhere.

The home of the earl of Carstairs was pleasant enough, with wide marble floors, Wedgewood blue walls, and the usual white plaster adornment on ceilings and cornices. He wondered how much of the pleasantness was due to the lady on his arm and how much had been the architect’s intent.

The curved oak staircase was less than impressive, but modesty suited a rural manor. Pascoe was more interested in the countess walking stiffly beside him as if waiting for an ax to fall. Perhaps the banshee wail was more than she had led him to believe, although it was fading now. Banshees were nonsense, of course, but every family had explanations for the weirdness of their old houses. If the place had been his, he would have stuffed Carstairs up chimneys until he found the windy one.

If he actually believed in screaming ghosts, then he'd have to believe his children were haunted, which he refused to do.

They entered a grand salon of gilded plasterwork, enormous Aubusson carpets, and strangely heavy furniture. He would have expected delicate Chippendale or Hepplewhite in this ornate setting. He glanced at the countess, who had stiffened even more, if that was possible. Her upper lip quivered in disapproval, and her eyes narrowed as she took in her surroundings. Ah, so the lady was not responsible for the vulgarity.

Pascoe studied the occupants perched on the velvet-cushioned walnut sofas and chairs. The ladies wore petticoats so full, he could almost imagine them from the Georgian era, were it not for the immensity of their billowing sleeves and lack of powdered wigs.

The gentlemen were mostly young, corseted into their tight waistcoats and stiff neckcloths. Instead of casual rural tweeds and buckskin, they wore formal black, as if they were still in the city on a morning call. None of them were of the sort to have crossed the corridors of government, although Pascoe recognized the younger son of a Scots earl. Hangers-on, he surmised. He caught a faint whiff of desperation. An heiress or two must be present.

Once the banshee wail faded, the butler stoically announced their presence. Pascoe looked for Carstairs but didn't see anyone who might be his old school mate. He turned his attention to the vapid young women—until a different unholy ruckus reverberated through the ceiling, shaking the plaster.

Pascoe instantly stepped in front of the countess, shielding her until he could ascertain they weren't being attacked by an army of savages or that the roof wouldn't cave in.

The ladies squealed and clutched each other. The young men froze. An ominous clatter of metal and a volley of curses followed.

"A suit of armor," the butler intoned without blinking a lash. "A minor mishap. Shall I bring tea?"

Pascoe sensed that the countess was on the brink of hysterical giggles. Relaxing, he hid his own smirk. "I take it this is a common occurrence?" he whispered. He brought her out of hiding, keeping her lovely long fingers on his arm until he had a better sense of the

situation.

She shook her head, and he admired the glint of auburn in this gloom.

"It would have taken an army of armored knights to produce that racket," Pascoe suggested, although he could be persuaded a very large mass of metal falling down an entire staircase might possibly have caused such clamor.

"Armored knights?" she asked in sarcasm. "Why on earth would he decorate with armor? This isn't a castle, although Carstairs' taste in furnishings is purely medieval."

"Ah, I had wondered about that." Another clatter, apparently from the stairwell, prevented him from asking more.

"Damn all the bedeviled fiends in hell! Forester, remove these ungodly knives from the wall!" a petulant voice called.

"The footman's name is Forest, and the *knives* are an extensive collection of military swords hung by my late husband's predecessor, who had an inordinate fancy for weaponry," the lady murmured.

The guests whispered among themselves, apparently uninterested in the newcomers until introductions were made by their host, who seemed to be having difficulty making his way to the salon if the volume of his curses was any indication.

A few more metallic crashes followed, but Carstairs finally arrived, still dusting off his coat and hair. A fine layer of cobwebs adorned the back of his tailored coat, no doubt the result of falling ancient weapons. Pascoe studied the new earl. Although he had to be in his late twenties, Gilroy Darrow, Lord Carstairs, still possessed the sulky mouth of a spoiled child and the narrow eyes of a small mind. To the ladies, he was no doubt handsome enough with his thick blond hair and pretty visage.

The lady on Pascoe's arm clenched his arm hard enough to leave bruises, but she tilted her chin and waited for her late husband's heir to notice her.

Carstairs did so in a remarkably short amount of time. Standing beneath an atrocious painting of a pack of hounds mauling a fox, he screamed with an edge of fear, "You! You nearly beheaded me! Baker, Forester, remove her at once! And after you do, pack your bags and leave with her! I'll not have my commands disobeyed! I could have been killed. Take the witch out!"

"You have lived here over a year. You should know by now that their names are Barker and Forest," the countess said regally, not retreating from the earl's ire. "And you invited me, so they did obey your command."

Stunned by this defiance, the young earl froze in astonishment.

Hiding his admiration and laughter at the lady's temerity, Pascoe

made a deferential knee to his host, straightened, and inserted his monocle to study him. "Your godfather sent us," he said with just a hint of disapproval.

"My damned god. . ." The earl swallowed his tirade as his brain finally kicked in. "Uncle Willie sent you?" he asked in disbelief.

"You did request his aid, did you not? If not, then we will by all means remove ourselves from your presence." Pascoe pretended not to notice the increased whispering among the other guests. "I shall tell His Majesty that our services are not required."

He watched with satisfaction as Carstairs lost his choleric color. Before any reply could be made, the banshee wailed again, and the enormous, hideous painting over the earl's head ripped from the wall. Even Lady Carstairs screamed.

With the training of his youth in a chaotic household of males, Pascoe leapt to catch the heavy frame. The weight nearly yanked his arm out of his bandages, but he stoically hefted the wood on his good shoulder until the earl could duck and grab the other side. Between them, they lowered the massive monstrosity to the floor.

"It's *her*, I tell you! She has cursed me! If His Majesty thinks sending a witch will fix things, then he's all about in his head," the brainless youth cried, without a word of gratitude for having his useless gray matter saved from becoming a greasy spot on the marble.

Pascoe pondered beating the brat with the gilded frame to see if opening his skull might knock some sense into him.

Wide-eyed at the near-crowning, the countess recovered her normal composure. Sweeping her long skirts closer to Pascoe, she waved her hand at the stunned earl and chanted, "*Testes vos, ut in inferno putrescet.*" Her tone held a hint of sarcasm. "There, all curses removed."

The earl turned white and stared in confusion.

"May your balls rot in hell?" Pascoe whispered in laughter for her ears alone. He was having difficulty dousing his irreverent humor and focusing on the seriousness of the situation.

The countess checked Pascoe's shoulder for blood. "He wants curses, I can be creative," she muttered back.

Apparently reassured that he'd not disturbed his bandage with his heroics, she studied the wall from which the frame had fallen and spoke in a louder voice. "The painting that used to be there was built into century-old wainscoting and should never have been removed. Your workmen did not do a proper job of hanging the new one."

Gazing at the holes in the wall, Pascoe rather agreed with her. The banshee cry had faded with her *curse*.

"Damned Irishmen," the earl muttered, tilting the frame against the wall and dusting himself off again. He glared at the holes, at the

frame, anywhere but at Pascoe and the countess.

"If anyone has cursed you, it's your laborers," Pascoe said with relish. "When did the accidents begin?"

Carstairs shot him a furious look. "It's her, I tell you. She hates me and wants me dead."

Pascoe saw no reason to speak for the inimitable countess. He raised his eyebrows and allowed the lady to answer for herself.

"If you were dead, Oscar would be earl. Why on earth would I ever believe that preferable?" she asked with a frostiness that should have coated the young lord in ice.

One of the ladies separated herself from the herd. In a flurry of petticoats and pale blue silk, she crossed the carpet to cling to Carstairs' arm. She made a pretty curtsy. "Introduce us, please, my dear." The scent of wealthy privilege wafted around her.

Ah, the heiress. Pascoe bowed. "Aaron Pascoe, my lady, and may I present Brighid, Lady Carstairs. Forgive our informality in the tumult."

"Lady Belinda Neville," the earl said grumpily. "Sister of an old friend of mine." He glared at the ceiling as the ear-piercing wail started up again. "Cursed, I tell you. What else could that be?"

"The wind in a faulty flue or broken window," Pascoe suggested. "If you are having labor problems, they may have set a whistle where it cannot be seen. Witches and curses are superstitious fol-de-rol."

The earl did not seem pacified. Before he could argue, Pascoe repeated in a voice of pure logic, "Did you have these problems when you first moved here? When did they begin?"

Carstairs looked annoyed. "When I told her holiness here that I was replacing her brother with mine."

"Not precisely true," the countess murmured. "Darrow had been in charge a month or more, had begun replacing experienced laborers with Irishmen, and increasing working hours. The wails began when the older laborers complained."

The banshee screeched and another painting over their heads wobbled. Pascoe grabbed the earl's arm and propelled him away from the wall. Another hunting picture tilted but didn't fall.

"You see!" the earl shouted. "She's doing it again!"

"Disagreeing with you?" Pascoe asked in disdain. "You need to be sending for the workmen who hung those paintings instead of behaving like a puerile fool."

Lady Belinda tugged the earl's arm. "Please, if Mr. Pascoe is from the king, would you not consider his suggestion? I would very much like to make the lady's acquaintance, and I cannot do so if you send her away."

Bouncing up and down in agitation, Carstairs glared at the

countess. Pascoe noted the young fop wore shoes with high heels—he was shorter than Lady Carstairs. Actually, now that he saw the two together, he suspected the earl was very much of an age with the young countess—who had rejected the offer of his bed. The lad was suffering from injured dignity.

The countess watched the entire episode with feigned amusement—she was still digging her fingers into his arm. The frost queen *cared* about what happened in this household.

“Fine,” the earl grumbled. “I will talk to Oscar about the workmen.”

The slender hand on Pascoe’s arms measurably relaxed. The lady was valiant, facing the enemy without flinching. He admired her resilience.

After introductions, the countess walked away with the heiress to meet the other guests. Pascoe missed the haunting scent of gardenias. In its place, he became aware of another stench much less pleasant—that of corruption, if he did not mistake.

It did not seem to exude from the glowering young earl but from the direction of the hall. Pascoe turned just as another guest entered. Short, stout, blond, and bow-legged, the newcomer looked so much like a pug-ugly version of his more slender brother that Pascoe recognized him at once—Oscar Darrow.

Pascoe did not generally suffer instant repulsion. Perhaps it was the countess’s description of the bully that set him on edge. As he’d told Lady Carstairs, he’d gone to school with these two, although at the time, he had been considerably older and out of their range. But he recalled them now. Oscar, in particular, had made the lives of any number of students miserable, even at a very young age.

The earl almost visibly puffed up as he pointed at the fallen painting. “Oscar, who hung this damnable thing?”

The banty rooster strutted over, glancing at Pascoe’s watch fobs and cane with disdain. Holding back a grin, Pascoe lifted his monocle and studied the termite back. “*Bonjour, mon ami,*” he said in his most repellant voice. “How have you been since last I saw you? Taking a header into the fountain then, hey?”

It had not been one of his finer moments, admittedly. Oscar Darrow couldn’t have been more than eight. Pascoe had been nearly a decade older. But Oscar had a gang of bullies who were tormenting a scholarly lad with a club foot. Pascoe had merely upended Oscar and dipped him into the school fountain headfirst. It had been a blustering cold day, and depending on one’s perspective, it was fortunate the bully had not died of pneumonia or drowning. Not well done of him.

If Darrow recognized him, he didn’t let on. Rudely, he turned to his brother and asked, “Who’s the court-card?”

“Uncle William sent him,” the earl warned. “Mr. Pascoe, my brother, although you seem to know him?”

“Went to the same schools,” Pascoe said airily. “I’m sure I was beneath the notice of a king’s godson. But I’m here at His Majesty’s behest to answer your complaints, although letting a blast furnace burn down was not well done. He’ll be displeased.”

Darrow glared. “It’s the witch’s fault. She incites the men to rebellion. We need an army to bring them back in line. Or to hang the witch.”

“And her brother?” Pascoe suggested.

“Yes, precisely.” Pleased to be understood, Darrow opened up. “He’s no more than a rabble-rouser, threatening to bring down an industry that is the backbone of the kingdom.”

“Yes, that *is* His Majesty’s concern. The Royal Navy requires a plentiful supply of iron at reasonable prices. Your mines and foundry are vital to the nation. But an army would disrupt production. Surely such drastic measures would not be required with proper management.” Pascoe watched as Darrow’s eyes narrowed into pinpricks. The stench of corruption grew stronger.

The banshee began to wail again, and glass crashed in another room.

CHAPTER 10

BRIDEY NOTICED Lady Belinda wincing at the smashing glass. The other guests looked almost resigned, merely glancing around to be certain they weren't in danger before returning to their tea and gossip.

The imperturbable Mr. Pascoe squinted through his monocle and looked about as if he smelled a cesspool. How a man as masculine as this Ives could hide behind dithering insouciance baffled Bridey, but she understood the *why*. Concealing strength disarmed lack-wits like Carstairs.

She shuddered at the shattering glass, imagining the eighteenth century pier glasses or Staffordshire china in ruins. Puzzled by the changes in her former home, Bridey turned to the woman who might be the next countess. "Have you visited before? Have these... occurrences... become common?"

Lady Belinda almost looked relieved to discuss the subject. "Carstairs has complained of it." She looked a trifle embarrassed. "He blames you somehow. But this is my first visit. I don't wish to believe in ghosts, but..."

Bridey shrugged. "There are spirits here, but to my knowledge, they are incapable of harm. Let us investigate the source of this last crash. I would hate to see the good crystal demolished."

Leaving Pascoe to irritate their purple-faced hosts with his brand of effete diplomacy, Bridey strode from the room, directly to the butler's pantry where the crystal was stored. Barker was gazing in dismay at a glass cabinet that had come detached from the wall.

"It's the royal china, my lady," he said in what was almost a wail of despair. "This cannot go on much longer or the spirits will bring the house down."

"Nonsense, Barker. Someone has loosened the fastenings. Look at the plaster. Find who was working in here last and have him dismissed. That set was no longer complete anyway. What is the meaning of the atrocious furniture in the main salon? Did they crush the Queen Anne?"

Lady Belinda picked up an unbroken saucer from the collection and admired it wistfully. "This would have been lovely in the dining chamber."

"Yes, well, china can be replaced," Bridey said, examining the wall more closely. "People cannot. The Queen Anne, Barker?"

"There was a drunken brawl after your departure, my lady," the butler said mournfully. "I should not say more."

"Of course not, it's no longer my affair. But a word of advice, if I may, hire only people you know and trust personally, people who would not see you or the other servants harmed, at least. I don't need to read portents to see there is wickedness afoot."

Not unintelligent, Barker straightened and nodded grandly. "Understood, my lady. Although the staff fears ghosts and departs daily."

"I'll take a look around." Bridey lifted her skirts away from the shattered china. "But I don't believe any of the family spirits would be inclined to damage china."

Barker looked relieved. "They'll believe you, my lady."

She shot him a look of scorn. "They should have believed me earlier."

The butler flinched as she sailed out, Belinda trailing behind her.

"What do you mean about family spirits?" the intrepid young woman asked.

"All houses as old as this contain elements of the people who have lived here. Just as you leave fingerprints in dust, they leave imprints of themselves on the household." Bridey didn't attempt to explain that she saw those imprints as auras.

"The first countess had exquisite taste, hiring William Adam—the father of Robert—to finish the mantels and salons," she continued. "William wasn't so well known as his son, but their tastes were classical. You'll hear her spirit occasionally in the tinkling crystal in the chandelier. The earl who collected swords often casts a shadow over the display. Their spirits are just *there*. Ethereal beings cannot break china."

Not to her knowledge, at least.

The lady paled but wordlessly scurried to keep up with her.

Bridey swept up the staircase to the landing where the swords had been displayed. They'd been relegated to one corner, replaced by a collection of old shotguns and blunderbusses, one of which was now lying on the stairs. "Really, Carstairs has the most abominable taste. If I were a spirit, I'd protest, too."

She bent over to retrieve the battleax that had once hung proudly as centerpiece to the display. With the weapon safely in hand, she opened her third eye.

An aura of muddied angry red, and a sad, weak lemon-yellow, hovered over the fallen weapons. She thought it was the same aura who'd often hovered there, admiring the collection, but he was no longer proud.

She scanned their surroundings, but from this vantage point, she

saw only the one unhappy spirit. She'd never felt endangered by the family ghosts, but for safety, she closed her mind again. There was so much anger in this household now, it didn't seem wise to leave herself vulnerable. Was it possible for a spirit to rip weapons from the wall and drop them on Carstairs? She really couldn't blame him.

"You see ghosts, my lady?" the girl asked anxiously.

"If you wish to call these ancient impressions ghosts, then yes. But they are truly no more than that—impressions. They cause no harm." She hoped. She studied the wall where the fallen blunderbuss had been. "Look at that hanger where this gun should be." She pointed at a bent iron support.

"It's twisted?" Lady Belinda asked tentatively.

"Exactly, by human hand. While the earl was away, someone has taken liberties. I'd suggest you take him back to Edinburgh where he is safe until someone determines who wishes to kill him."

The girl gasped and raced after Bridey as she strode back down the stairs.

"Who could possibly wish to kill him? Gilly is temperamental, upon occasion, but he's not a bad man. He's been all that is kind to me, although I am no one of great importance, when he could have any lady in the kingdom."

"His brother is his heir. His laborers despise him for hiring Darrow. His servants are terrified and hate change, which he seems inordinately fond of. I am sure there are any number of other reasons people might despise a wealthy, powerful newcomer. They are no longer my concern, but they may be yours, so I warn you now. I'll not be staying to help."

Once upon a time she would have felt guilty for neglecting her duty to the village, to the earl, to the estate. Now, she gloried in the freedom to turn her back and go. At some point, people had to solve their own problems.

She had two important ladies in Wystan awaiting her return for the life-affirming duty of childbirth—two ladies who would not call her witch if anything went wrong. The window to her future was wide open.

"You aren't really a witch, are you?" Lady Belinda asked, hurrying to catch up. "Lord Carstairs is not normally so superstitious. I cannot imagine what has set him against you so."

"With a little more experience, you could. I'm a midwife, not a witch, but men like having someone to blame when anything goes wrong." Bridey noticed the girl had gone from calling the earl by the intimate *Gilly* to his proper title, so she was no longer frightened. That bode well for the future, if the little idiot did not drive her off.

"A midwife," the girl said in wonder. "And the late earl allowed

you to do so? My father would have had an apoplexy!"

Had George cared about her at all, he might have had a fit also, but Bridey saw no reason to speak ill of the dead. "The village needs someone to treat their ills. Perhaps you could persuade Carstairs to lure a physician here. It would raise his standing considerably in the community."

"I don't dare make suggestions yet," Belinda confided anxiously. "They are still discussing settlements."

"There will be time. But do try to send him back to the city for now. The state of unrest here is dangerous." Advising the girl increased her own anxiety. She needed to persuade Mr. Pascoe to depart with the twins. And her wretchedly stubborn brother. This place vibrated with hostility and danger. Perhaps some unemployed worker had come unhinged and decided burning the foundry wasn't enough.

To her relief, Mr. Pascoe was leading the reptilian brothers into the foyer as she and Lady Belinda descended the stairs. The banshee had stopped howling, and no puzzling crashes delayed their departure. A short visit suited her fine.

"I am to inspect the foundry with Mr. Darrow," Pascoe announced as they approached. "Do you wish to visit or shall I return you to the house?"

"The house, please." She fretted over Pascoe going anywhere near the dangerous foundry filled with armed men, but she knew not to argue in the presence of others. Besides, he truly was no concern of hers, was he? "I need to return to Wistan."

"The earl has invited us to a little soiree. Surely you would not wish to miss that?" Pascoe held out his arm to her.

Now that she was escaping this house that was no longer her home, she didn't feel the need for his reassuring strength, but she wanted to leave more than she wished to make a scene. She took the bonnet Barker offered and tied it on. "I am sure I will know no one. I'd rather see how my patients are doing. And you still must decide what to do with the twins."

Carstairs looked so relieved at her refusal that she almost changed her mind out of spite.

"Thank you for your hospitality, my lord, Mr. Darrow," Pascoe said genially. "I'll send a note around when I'm ready to visit your esteemed institution. If you'll excuse us. . ."

"You will tell Uncle Willie that his aid would be most appreciated?" Carstairs asked.

"Of course, of course." Pascoe waved nonchalantly while practically pushing Bridey through the door. "As soon as I determine that aid is actually needed."

He hurried her over the threshold and the door closed behind them before the brothers could protest his last statement.

"They want an army. Why?" Bridey demanded.

"To prove they have the strength of the king behind them and to terrify the laborers into accepting inhuman hours and wages, naturally." Bereft of his usual amiable demeanor, Pascoe's square jaw set in angry determination. "The earl knows utterly nothing of his laborers. He leaves everything to Demon Darrow."

Bridey thought of all the friends and neighbors with whom she'd grown up, patients of hers and her grandfather's, people with whom she and Fin had played as children. There had been poverty and sickness, yes, but the village had been able to take care of its own. People worked, shared time with their families, shared what they had with others.

The foundry had created dreams of wealth, and for a very brief while, those dreams had come true, relatively speaking. People had added rooms to their cottages, bought finer clothes, talked of establishing a permanent school for their children. They had been happy when the benefits of newfound wealth had been fairly distributed.

It didn't seem possible that in a year, the tide should have changed so drastically. "Is there nothing we can do to stop Darrow's depredations?" she asked in despair. When she realized what she'd said, she wanted to wash her mouth out with soap.

"I was hoping you'd ask that," Pascoe said in satisfaction, not giving her time to retreat. "I can send condemning reports to the king, but he cannot remove his godsons unless we declare them criminals. And even then, there is not much that can be done for the laborers unless Carstairs is forced to sell the foundry and mines."

Bridey settled on the carriage seat and closed her eyes against incipient panic. What had she just done? Had she really offered to help? "I am only the dowager. I have no power here," she reminded him as he climbed up beside her.

How had she not noticed his appealing aroma of shaving soap and masculinity? Despite the languid guise he presented to the world, Pascoe filled the old carriage with his presence, his energy, and his resolve. She must have slipped out of her mind earlier not to have leapt straight from the carriage and run far away.

"Power is overrated," Pascoe said with a scornful wave. "Intelligence and information are what I need. Darrow will clean up areas to show me, let me talk to his pawns, and send me away confident that I will report the laborers are disgruntled for no reason. You will hear the true story."

"Fin is the one you want, then," she corrected. "He knows the

men.”

“Fin is the hothead who got us here in the first place. He is as prejudiced against Darrow as vice versa. I want truth, not anger.”

“I still do not see what I can do,” she said stubbornly.

“Rid the manor of ghosts,” he suggested. “Coax Carstairs to trust you. I need to know what is happening in his head, if anything. And the servants can tell tales.”

“Absolutely not!” Horrified, Bridey willed the old horse to go faster. “There are no ghosts, just a malicious hand at work.”

“Carstairs is convinced otherwise. He will not believe his brother or anyone else would harm him. I doubt that it’s even entered his empty head. The lad is not bad, just inexperienced, spoiled, and a trifle stupid. I’ll help you convince him that the ghosts will listen to you, that it was his fault in turning you away that is causing the damage.”

“I cannot see how this will help,” she said stubbornly. “I must return to Wystan. The birth of two babes wins over imaginary fears. And you should be looking into the care of the twins.”

As if her words were prophesy, two sprites popped from the rhododendron beside the drive. Each carried a cooing pigeon in their arms. At sight of the carriage, they smiled broadly.

CHAPTER 11

STANDING on the windy Peel tower roof, Pascoe tucked the twins' stolen pigeons back into their cages, pondering why he was able to deal confidently with kings and fools and not his own children.

He shuddered at the image of his tiny offspring climbing the dangerously narrow, dark stone steps to reach this roof, then tottering around the windswept parapet. They could have been blown off!

The haughty countess had been the one to persuade the birds away from the brats. She was the least motherly person he knew, but she'd marched them back to their cots for naps in some mysterious manner he lacked.

"Men don't rock children to sleep, right?" he asked a gray bird pecking at pebbles. Its beady black eyes glazed with disinterest, and its wing drooped, apparently damaged.

"Coo," the bird responded scornfully.

"Exactly. Men do important things. Women take care of children." He lifted the bird to examine its feathers.

He couldn't tell a male bird from a female one. They both carried messages. He scowled. "But you are bird-wits, flying for corn. Men have superior intelligence."

Which gave them the ability to mistreat and cheat their fellow men—not exactly a commendation for intelligence.

The bird fluttered its useless wing. Pascoe wondered if new feathers could be attached somehow. Pondering flight was simpler than children.

A new bird flew in, a brown-and-white speckled one. It immediately set to grabbing the corn scattered among the pebbles on the roof. Pascoe's gut roiled when he realized it wore a message tube on its leg. Would it be from Theo? Had Ashford already spoken with the king? In this time of political turmoil, that didn't seem possible.

Tucking the injured pigeon into his pocket on top of a news sheet he'd been carrying, he leaned over and captured the new bird, detaching the container. If it wasn't from Theo, he probably ought to take the message to Fin, but if the boy was preaching sedition, it was better to know it now.

He opened the tube and removed the paper. The thickness of the ink spoke of Theo's urgency before Pascoe even read the words: *Aster is having pains! Come now!*

Without a second thought for his own plans, Pascoe raced for the stairs. The child must be coming early. He knew exactly how disastrous that could be.

At least Aster was healthy, he reassured himself as he took the worn stone stairs back to the main house, grabbing the cold walls to keep from plunging headfirst. Lily had already been ill with the lung disease when she'd borne the twins too soon. The physician had assured Pascoe that he couldn't have known about the illness or even that she carried twins, so he was in no way to blame for his wife's health deteriorating, but he still felt the heart-rending guilt. He would do nothing to allow Theo and Aster to suffer as he had.

He found the countess tip-toeing from the nursery and waved the message at her. She snatched and read it before he could speak his fears.

She frowned a little but didn't seem overly worried. "I'll take the gig. The first child takes time. Aster won't be ready for hours. I'm a little concerned about a child born weeks too early, but we have many resources to call on."

"I cannot allow you to go alone!" he said in dismay.

She bestowed a frosty look of disdain upon him that he remembered from their first meeting. The lady had perfected *cold*. And he still felt warm all over when she focused those gorgeous green eyes on him. He'd practically been a saint these last years since Lily's death. He was paying the price now.

"You cannot abandon your children, and they will delay me," she pointed out. "Besides, tradition frowns upon unmarried males in the castle while a child is being born. Given the number of spirits inhabiting the place, I have to agree. You shouldn't be there."

Pascoe did his best not to roll his eyes at this crass superstition from an educated woman. "Horses will be faster than the gig."

She actually considered that. "My mare is slow. If I might borrow your gelding, though, I can be there faster. Mrs. Mac will find a nursemaid while you attend your business here."

Pascoe frowned at that answer. It struck too close to the arguments he'd had with Lily when she'd insisted on carrying on her charity work even if he couldn't accompany her. Still, the lady was not his wife, and she was correct about the twins delaying them.

"Take my horse and your brother, then. Don't go alone. We don't know how far hatred and superstition will drive the ignorant."

She looked at him in surprise. He couldn't tell if it was because she'd been expecting argument or for his warning.

"Thank you," she said with a regal nod of that lovely auburn head. "Aster will be fine. But the restriction on men still applies. Once I arrive, I'll have to give Fin a task to keep him out of trouble."

She was being gracious and helpful in her own way. Pascoe didn't like letting her go without him, but he nodded curtly and told himself that he would never earn honors by chasing after skirts—especially ones with no need or interest in his abilities.

With the pigeon still in his pocket, he set off to organize horses and family.

He gave Fin a stern warning and waved him off. Next, he found Mrs. Mac and had her lock the tower stairs so the children couldn't climb to the roof again. He considered placing a high bolt on the nursery door, but they'd have no escape in case of fire.

Frowning, he warned a maid not to let the brats out of her sight, then donned old work clothes from his valise, and let himself out the bottom door of the tower. He'd noticed the villagers tended to use that entrance and not the main one.

Adding a handful of corn to the newsheet in his capacious coat pocket, he stroked the pigeon. "Now, for a little fun."



THAT EVENING, safely in Wystan castle, Bridey smoothed the covers over Lady Aster's bed and handed her a book. "You've been going up and down stairs again, haven't you? I warned you! Let's see if we can bake the wee one a little longer. Try lying still for a change."

Aster grimaced. "I have cooks for baking. There are far too many more interesting things to be done than watching an oven. Give me your chart over there. It's littered with interesting points. I need to study them more to see if you're in danger of a house falling on your head or of falling off a house."

Bridey laughed. "It's possible Carstairs' house might once have fallen on my head, but that danger is past." She handed over the sheaf of papers Aster had been working on. "Tell me if there is another pain. We'll start counting the time between contractions if your little monster is as impatient as you and insists on coming now."

"You are the most sensible midwife I could have," Aster said in satisfaction. "If you were always available, we might not even need Wystan tower for our birthing."

"You don't need it now," Bridey said in dismissal of this part of the Malcolm legend. "It's just a good nesting place, with many friendly family spirits available to look after you."

"And a lovely library to keep me amused. Go look after Celeste or she'll be pacing the floors." Aster waved a pen in dismissal.

Outside the chamber, Bridey found Lord Theo pacing, not his sister-in-law. "She is fine, the babe is fine, and you may return to your stars now," she told him.

"Is there anything I can *do*?" the handsome astronomer asked in desperation. "I hate just waiting helplessly."

Bridey patted his arm. "You and Aster are well suited. Run up and down the stairs fetching books for her is all I can recommend at this stage. Sending the pigeon to fetch me was about the most help you can be, I fear."

His neckcloth was more askew than usual. Papers spilled out of his coat pockets, and he had dust on his waistcoat, presumably from climbing through the library for his wife. He ran his hand through his rumpled brown hair. "I am sorry if I brought you here for no reason. How is Pascoe faring?"

"He seems to think human nature is curable," she said with a shrug. "It is not. I do not envy his task."

"Pascoe harbors no such foolish notion," Theo corrected. "The man is an enigma. Second guessing him is impossible. Did he tell you that he once stopped a band of smugglers by buying their barrels of brandy, tainting them with some mushroom that causes retching and squirts, and served it up to the entire shire?"

Bridey laughed. "No, he didn't. So the whole shire turned against the smugglers?" She drew him out, letting him settle down before he approached his wife in his current state of anxiety.

"That, and the smugglers beat their French contacts bloody with their oars for selling them tainted brandy, thus severing any relation. Pascoe's solutions can be quixotic."

"I hope he finds some way of doing the same for Carstairs," she said. "Perhaps he can curse the pair and send them running back to the city."

Theo shrugged. "The smugglers found better occupation selling what they called dried haddock that cured digestive disorders. I don't think they came up with that themselves."

"I don't know whether to label him fraud or genius." For the first time in what seemed forever, she laughed at the maddening gentleman's ingenuity.

"He's creative. He's had to be," Theo said, still pacing but less agitated as he spoke. "Growing up, he was always the family mediator. Ashford would pull rank on all the youngers, and Pascoe would take him down with wits, since no one could with brawn. We had more than one bastard and distant cousin cluttering Iveston, but they'd wait to see what the heir would do before taking sides or making decisions. Not Pascoe. As far as he was concerned, he was the eldest, and no one could out-best him. That he'd never inherit the title had no meaning whatsoever."

"The eldest? He's older than Ashford?" Bridey asked with interest.

"By a few months. Age had nothing to do with his attitude,

though. He was always more clever, faster, more mature, more almost anything, and he let us know it. His ingenious solutions command even Ashford's respect these days. Pascoe will take care of Carstairs' problems. Don't worry about him." Calmer now, Lord Theo took a deep breath and strolled into his wife's chambers as if he had not just worn a rut in the carpet.

Mr. Pascoe did, indeed, seem to be the fascinating man his aura predicted. It wasn't easy to tell who or what he was beneath his various veneers. Had she met a man like that when she'd been sixteen. . . But no, she'd known her duty. Her grandfather had taught her that those gifted with the ability to do what others could not must work toward the common good.

Mr. Pascoe might be charming, but his own benefit drove him. That he was able to employ his unique abilities for the common good while climbing the ladder of rank and wealth worked as long as it was convenient for him. She could not fault him for that, but she would not be a rung in his ladder. He would fare fine in Northbridge without her.

Except—he'd been shot the moment he'd entered the village.



ONCE HE'D VERIFIED—without Darrow's escort—that the foundry was no longer in operation after the fire, with no sign of repairs in sight, Pascoe borrowed a mule and rode upcountry to the coal and iron mines. He'd learned to trust his nose when it detected the stench of rottenness, and the foundry had reeked of it.

That could just be Oscar, he admitted with a wry laugh. It wasn't as if he could determine the source of rot, just that it was there. He yanked his cap over his eyes and let his unshaven jaw speak for itself as he wandered up to a ramshackle office at the mine entrance. Mines never smelled good.

He had stabled the mule at a tavern and left his expensive walking stick at the house. For this performance, he used an old tree limb, pretending to limp up the hill. His old tweed coat swung loosely on his shoulders, and his trousers had to be held by a rope. He donned a bent pair of spectacles and petted the bird in his pocket. "You'll tell me when I'm too old for this, won't you, my dove?"

The pigeon cooed helpfully.

His wounded shoulder ached. He fretted the twins would find some way to follow him. He wanted Lady Carstairs to. . . well, he just wanted her, period.

He didn't want to be entering the stench of hell.

Whistling a dirge, he lumbered up to the rough shack he'd been

told was the mine office. He hunched over his crude walking stick and kept his cap on. He'd been told that Oscar spent the better part of his day here now that the foundry was dead. And sure enough, there was the surly bastard in all his glory, sitting at a battered desk, counting his worth, if Pascoe was any judge. And Pascoe knew himself to be a very good judge.

He also knew Oscar Darrow was a blind fool who wouldn't look at more than his clothes to judge him. He had no fear of being recognized.

"Most benevolent sir," he said from the doorway, changing his voice from one of authority to suppliant. "Might I have a moment of your time?" He walked a slender thread with this particular disguise—educated but unemployed, a bit of a rarity in these parts.

The young *honorable* glanced up in irritation. "What do you want?"

"I am a bookkeeper of exemplary ability, good sir," Pascoe said with a slight bow. "I have come to inquire if you might have need of such." Fin had already informed him that the last bookkeeper had quit and returned to the city. Pascoe had sent word to Edinburgh to find him.

"References?" Darrow demanded.

"Naturally, naturally, although not on me at the moment. I will happily bring them to your attention if you are interested. I have worked with the great duke of Sommersville himself, but he has many relations in need of positions. You know how that is." Pascoe knew the duke, so he knew himself safe in using his name.

"You do not dress like a man who would work for a duke," Darrow growled. "Show me how you add figures." He shoved a paper across his desk.

Pascoe kept his grin to himself. Solemnly, he took the paper, removed the pigeon from his pocket, and set it on the desk. From his other pocket, he removed pebbles, corn, and whatever other seeds he'd found in the granary. While he added the long string of numbers in his head, he scattered the feed in front of the bird, which immediately began scratching and pecking.

"Six hundred forty-three pounds and eight pence, sir," Pascoe said triumphantly, stuffing the bird back in his pocket.

"What the devil is the bird for?" Darrow demanded, eyeing the still scattered grain suspiciously.

"Is the answer correct?" Pascoe asked ingenuously. "I know it's an unusual method, but Dove here has found every error in the duke's books and saved him a great deal of coin. But only I can understand him."

"That's not a dove. That looks like one of those filthy pigeons

from Finley's tower."

So the man wasn't a total dolt, like his brother. Next test. . .

Pascoe used the paper to deposit the seed in his pocket with the bird. "I don't know one bird from another. I just know this one is magic. The countess herself gave it to me. It's supported me and my family for years."

"The countess? Carstairs? If you're one of her minions, you can remove yourself instantly." Darrow rose from his chair, still eyeing Pascoe's pocket with suspicion.

"Lady Carstairs knows nothing of magic. She gave it to me to roast for my dinner." Pascoe leaned on his stick. "But it watched me do my numbers and picked up the trick somehow."

"You're mad. Go on with you now." Darrow pointed at the door.

"Did we add the number right?" Pascoe asked, not budging. "I can do more, if you wish. Give me the books there in front of you, and I'll have them totaled and balanced in no time."

"Birds aren't magic!" Darrow roared.

Pascoe shrugged. "All right then, just let me sit down a wee bit. The knee doesn't work so well these days. For taking up your time, I'll tote the ledger in front of you. You may sit back and relax a tad. We'll be done in no time."

The stocky young heir narrowed his eyes but apparently not seeing a wrong side to this suggestion, shoved the ledger at him and nodded at a wooden chair in the corner.

Pascoe dragged up the chair, leaned his stick against the desk, and sat down. Adjusting his spectacles, he removed the bird from his tweed again, and went to work. Unable to fly, Dove happily pecked and Pascoe toted sums. He'd always had a head for pounds and shillings even though he couldn't have done Theo's calculus if the king's crown depended on it.

He wished his memory was as good as his math, but while he worked, he absorbed enough of the figures to gather how much money the mine made in a day and how much it spent. He flipped a page and did a few extra columns just to see if the sums were similar. He went back and corrected a number of errors on completed pages, then shoved the ledger back to Darrow and put Dove back in his pocket.

"I understand there are people who don't believe in magic, but should you employ me, I'll need the bird," he said with great dignity. "You'll see my calculations are correct."

Since he'd just ascertained that Darrow wasn't the world's best accountant, he knew whatever number he put down, Darrow wouldn't argue with it until he'd had someone else look it over.

The mine operator studied the figures, scowled at the corrections,

then grimaced. "You're fast, I'll grant you that. Bring me the references in the morning, and we'll see what we can do."

"That's all I ask, sir." Pascoe stood, doffed his cap in a way that Darrow couldn't see his face, then hobbled out on his stick.

He wouldn't be back. He'd seen all he'd needed to see. Now, to have a look at the earl's books. . .

CHAPTER 12

LADY ASTER CONTINUED to have occasional contractions. Relieved to have a good excuse not to return to Northbridge, Bridey taught Lord Theo how to massage his wife's back to ease her discomfort, which kept him from wearing out rugs.

With Celeste to read to Aster, and Theo to run errands, Bridey had little to do until the child decided to be born. So she stole the opportunity to read up on other Malcolms able to see spirits. The twins were so mysterious that she thought they might have other abilities as well, but prying logic out of four-year olds, no matter how precocious, wasn't likely to happen.

To her surprise, on the third day of waiting, a maid ran up from the kitchen to deliver a message addressed to her. The servant bobbed a curtsy and departed without waiting for a reply. Bridey had sent Fin back to Northbridge, but this wasn't his writing. Almost afraid to open it, she held the paper with trembling fingers. Taking a deep breath, she broke the seal.

Carstairs really is in danger. Need you to calm the spirits. Or to shoot whoever is behind the violence. How soon can you come? Tell Theo his brat better be more important than the king—P.

She didn't need the "P" to identify the writer. The thick black penmanship was elegant, but the terse message indicated Mr. Pascoe's level of frustration.

The final line made her laugh. Mr. Pascoe was a determined man with his eye on the goal, regardless of life's minor events, like children. She wondered how he fared with the twins.

He would not like her reply. She picked up her pen and scrawled at the bottom of his note: *The child might arrive tomorrow or two weeks from now. Enjoy Mrs. Mac's cooking and get to know your children.*

Remembering how the children had used the boy courting the scullery maid to escape last time, Bridey thought it might be beneficial to see who had delivered the message before sending off her own.

Sweeping into the kitchen cellar in her finery, she rolled her eyes at sight of the twins happily eating bannocks beside the fire. They glanced up gleefully at her entrance but remained seated where they'd been told.

The cook was clucking over a rough gentleman in country tweed and unshaven jaw sitting at the table. At Bridey's arrival, he stood and

removed his filthy cap, revealing dark eyes as mischievous as his offspring's.

She glared, slapped her reply in front of him, and swirled around to return upstairs.

"I can't return without you," he called after her. "Your brother and his men, or the *spirits*, are likely to burn down the manor unless you return. I cannot endanger the children if they choose to follow me there."

"Fin?" She swung around again. "What does Fin have to do with anything?"

He shrugged. "I thought you might know. He knows who I am and avoids me."

"You cannot stay here," she pointed out in her frostiest voice. "Go back to the king and tell him his godsons are incompetent."

She started up the stairs again. "No," he said from behind her, apparently having crossed the room in two strides. The wretched man emanated masculinity in just his existence, without need of his many disguises. "Too many people will be harmed if the mines close. If you cannot bring yourself to help personally, talk to your brother."

Bridey continued up the stairs as if Mr. Pascoe had not spoken. Despite his grimy attire, he smelled of fresh soap and masculine musk, and she enjoyed the combination too well. Her hungry heart and lonely bed cried out for a real man, and she knew this one would supply what she needed.

Her sensible head shouted *Run!* Men had expectations she did not feel inclined to feed and presented entanglements she did not wish to accept. She was free now. Physical lust was not enough to justify losing any small portion of her hard-won liberty.

She stalked back to the library. He tramped along on her heels. She was aware that family and servants surrounded them. She was safe. She was just desperately unnerved.

"Fin is not violent," she said, returning to her seat at the library table. "Spirits cannot set fires."

Although she knew from sad experience spirits could cause emotional and maybe even mental mayhem and might even occupy a person, thus making them *capable* of physical damage. Uneasy, she shifted her books around on the table rather than look at the delectable Mr. Pascoe.

Undaunted, he settled his solid frame in the opposite seat and leaned over the table, distressingly close. "The dinner table caught fire while we were all sitting at it, and the ceiling fell in the study when we retired for brandy. So it appears as if they wish to kill Oscar, too. Perhaps they are trying to kill me as well."

Alarmed at that possibility, she had to clutch her hands to prevent

touching him to look for injury.

He twirled one of her books around to scan a page. "Latin?"

His rudeness released her from her frozen state. She took the book back. "Latin is the language of medicine. And Fin would not cause damage to a house and certainly not to the people in it."

"Fin is an engineer and perfectly capable of both incidents," he pointed out. "The Darrows are superstitious cretins, and he would be playing to their worst fears. So unless you wish to believe in violent spirits or extraordinary coincidence, your brother is the only logical conclusion."

Driving off the Darrows by mechanical means was precisely the sort of thing Fin would do—but not if it harmed others. He'd even arranged for everyone to leave the foundry before the furnace exploded.

"Everyone escaped unscathed from both incidents?" she asked warily.

He shrugged. "It was only a small portion of the ceiling, one not over any furniture. And the fire was limited to a tureen. The sparks caught the table linen on fire, but there was time to escape. That does not mean they were accidental."

Was it possible to arrange accidents that caused no harm? Far more likely than that spirits had caused them. And Fin was just young and smart enough to arrange them, she silently acknowledged.

"You cannot stay here," she insisted, feeling her own weakness. "Leave the twins, if you must, but find other accommodations. I know you do not believe in Malcolm legends, but talk to Lord Erran about his last visit here—with Celeste—exactly eight months ago."

Pascoe threw up his hands in disgust. "Fine. I'll leave in the morning. I'll camp in the woods, if necessary. Just tell me you will talk to your brother. I have found evidence that Oscar is either an incompetent idiot or systematically robbing the mine. But I cannot, in all good conscience, convince the king to leave Gilroy in charge of so much as a flea circus, and certainly not a vital national industry. I need to know Fin can be trusted."

Only partially pacified, Bridey shoved a book toward him. "Fin is too young to run a mine and foundry. He's an engineer, not a manager. I'd rather he found other uses for his abilities than wasting away in rural nonentity, dealing with a nincompoop. Only one Finley should be sacrificed per generation. You may persuade the king to take the operations away from Darrow, but you cannot remove Carstairs from his rightful inheritance."

Pascoe grimaced. "Maybe the king can knight Oscar, send him to South Africa to find gold, and we can find a smarter steward. What is this?" He flipped the pages of the old tome she'd handed him.

“As I said, Malcolms can often see or talk with spirits. Lady Ashford only hears them. I only see their auras. That is the journal of Christina, Duchess of Sommersville, from nearly a hundred years ago. She could see, hear, *and* talk with them to some limited extent. Spirits are not necessarily rational entities but are more likely emotional impressions.”

“Emotional impressions?” He wrinkled his straight nose in distaste as he flipped through the book.

“It is the reason we often believe they are trying to tell us something. There is a sense of urgency, a feeling that they have left an important task undone. Lady Christina believed that once she completed whatever task held the spirit to this earth, they would pass on to their reward.”

“So you are telling me that the twins are listening to an emotional impression of their mother, and that Lily feels as if she left unfinished business?” He slammed the book and glared at it.

“Of course she would feel as if she left unfinished business!” Bridey stood, unwilling to argue with a man who wouldn’t listen—or one who tempted her too well. “I do not advise staying the night. There are probably villagers in Wystan who would take your coin in exchange for a bed. Send the children up with one of the nursemaids, and I’ll see them settled in the nursery.”

Ever the gentleman, he stood when she did. His masculine bulk filled the passage to the door, and she resisted brushing that close to him. Their one kiss had filled her nights with longing. She was too weak right now to resist temptation.

“You will speak to Fin?” he asked—*demanded*.

“I will send a message, but I do not know if he is still home. We are not close these days.” Which saddened her, but he’d grown up at university and become his own man. She would not dictate to him.

Mr. Pascoe looked weary as he ran his hand through his rumpled dark hair. “I like the boy. I would not see him arrested. Thank you.”

Arrested! Twitching her skirt angrily, she stalked past him once he stepped aside. She should not allow this attraction to distract her from reality. Mr. Pascoe was the king’s man over and above all else. If he’d found evidence against Oscar—and she’d love to hear that story—he would have the ability to convict Fin as well.

Because she knew her brother was behind the burning of the furnace, at the very least.



PASCOE TOOK the twins up to the nursery. That they’d suddenly started talking was odd, but more cause for relief than concern. That Lady

Carstairs believed *Lily* haunted them. . . left him wondering who was hallucinating here, the children, him, or the lady.

Since the pair had only recently started talking, they weren't chatterers by any means. So he tended to listen when they spoke, if only to determine what went on in their odd little heads.

"Mama says you need the pretty lady," Edward said in his stilted voice that sounded as if he repeated what he'd been told.

He winced. There it was again, the pretense that they talked to their mother. If he allowed himself to believe Lily watched over him, she'd know he definitely *needed* the countess, but he was fairly certain his son wouldn't understand the lovemaking Pascoe had in mind. He studied Emma and wondered if she would speak if he separated the two. She smiled serenely, in apparent agreement with her twin.

"And what do *you* say?" he asked in desperation, unwilling to feed their mother fantasy.

"We like the lady," Emma replied without hesitation.

"She reads us stories," Edward explained.

His children liked a frozen, unsmiling, uncooperative female so far from maternal that his mind split at the thought of her even acknowledging children.

But she had. From the very first, the witchy woman had taken the twins in hand, without seeming to lift a finger. The lady didn't cuddle or coo or even *smile*, for all that was holy. He'd provided loving nurses, laughing teachers, engaging governesses, the very best money could provide—and his offspring preferred a frost queen. *Why?*

"Shall I read you a story?" he asked as a nursemaid hurried up the back stairs to meet them.

The twins puckered up their little brows and *thought* about it.

"Perhaps," they agreed in tandem.

Right about now, Pascoe would be relieved to hear them argue and fight as he and his cousins and nephews had done as children.

"I'll come back when you're tucked in," he promised.

"We want *that* book," Emma surprisingly insisted, pointing at the one the countess had given him.

"I'll see if it has good stories." Leaving the twins with the maid, he sought Theo's masculine company and understanding, but Theo was attending to his wife and surrounded by women.

Uncomfortable in the intimacy of Lady Aster's chambers, Pascoe found an unoccupied parlor, lit a lamp, and reluctantly opened the book. He hoped it contained tales suitable for children, but he suspected it did not.

The journal of the long-ago duchess was fraught with flowery language and euphemisms, but the duchess had a lively sense of humor. She described a treasure hunt and a ghostly vicar and a

particularly physical spirit who. . . *knocked weapons from walls*.

Suspicious, Pascoe read that passage several times. The old soldier or pirate captain's *ghost* was quite vivid in the lady's tale, and very physical. So, did he believe the late duchess was crazed—or had someone taken the tales from this book and reproduced them mechanically?

Was the countess trying to tell him something by giving him this particular book?

But the tomfoolery the journal described provided a rousing good story he would have enjoyed as a boy. With the details memorized, he strode down the corridor toward the nursery, determined to learn more about his children as the lady had ordered.

A celestial soprano ringing out from Lady Aster's chamber raised the hairs on the back of his neck. So, that was what Erran's wife sounded like. Celeste had always seemed to be a quiet, modest lady, but her voice. . . Now he understood some of his nephews' odd comments about it. Seamen would have been lured to their fate by such a siren.

Another female voice joined in. Curious, Pascoe would have sought the musical occasion, but he'd promised the twins a story. Dutifully, he entered the nursery.

The maid almost looked wide-eyed in panic at his arrival, but the twins were sitting up in their beds, waiting expectantly.

"The new baby is coming," Edward said matter-of-factly.

How the devil did the boy know that?

But remembering the countess's foolish superstition, Pascoe mentally rolled his eyes, understanding why the servant backed away from him. Resenting that anyone would think he would attack a woman, he gestured dismissively. "Go on. I'll see them settled."

The maid didn't hesitate but fled as if he were a fire-breathing dragon.

The siren song was less noticeable with the door closed. Pulling up a chair, Pascoe pretended to read from the old book as he wove the duchess's tale into storytelling form. As far as he could tell, the twins listened as if he taught a history lesson.

"Thank you, Papa," Edward said in his stilted voice when Pascoe finished his tale.

He sounded just like a boy who'd been reminded by his mother to be polite, not that Pascoe knew anything of mothers, except that Lily would have been a good one. That thought shivered his soul.

"Did you enjoy the story?" Pascoe asked.

"Is mama a ghost like in the book?" Emma asked worriedly.

A wind rattled the window panes.

"Does it matter as long as you hear her?" Pascoe asked, because

he didn't know what else to say. "Slide down beneath the covers so you don't get cold. It sounds as if a storm is coming up."

"I like ghosts," Edward said defiantly, pulling his covers up to this chin.

"You can't see them," Emma said sleepily. "The lady can."

Why did he have the feeling this was an old argument that only he hadn't heard before? Tired and confused, Pascoe tousled their hair and tucked in their blankets as a maid once had done for him long, long ago. He let himself out and waited in the corridor, hoping the nursemaid would return to look over the nursery.

Celeste's voice had been joined by others, all female. He couldn't make out the words, but it almost sounded like a chant. Aster's cry of pain cut through the harmony like a knife. Pascoe winced and set off to look for Theo.

He couldn't find a maid—or *any* servant—but located Theo in his tower, wearing a rut in the old floor. Pascoe poured him a brandy.

"I want to be there with Aster," Theo said through clenched teeth. "The women won't let me. It's weeks too early. She *needs* me."

"She won't appreciate you seeing her all sweaty and screaming, old fellow. Lily threw me out of the room, too." Pascoe poured himself a glass. "I'm thinking we should all become monks so the women needn't suffer."

Theo cast him a look of scorn. "Not helping."

"Then, how do you feel about ghosts?" he asked. "The women believe in them. So do the twins. Are we missing something?"

"*Spirits*, they believe in spirits. This place would give anyone peculiar notions." Theo threw back a swallow of brandy and continued rut-wearing.

The heavy door and distance muffled the chanting and any further cries from the bedchamber far below. Pascoe still felt restless enough to want to pace, had there been room to avoid collision. "We can't fight spirits with battleaxes or pistols. How does one rid the place of them? Poison 'em like rats?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Spirits don't exist." Theo stopped to glare out his telescope. "Except in their heads—Aster tells me the placement of the stars and planets at the moment of birth will dictate our child's character and future. She has made me promise to record what I see in the heavens while the child is being born."

"Unless a meteor obliterates us, I'm not seeing the relevance. Spirits, now, wouldn't they be able to inhabit us if they chose?" Pascoe cut a newly-fashionable cigar and threw out one of the many questions the journal had raised. It wasn't as if Theo would be capable of intelligent conversation anyway.

Theo made notes on the pad beside his telescope, then ran a hand

over his head as a particularly shrill cry penetrated the air. "Hell if I know," he said distractedly.

"Pity Erran isn't here to catch a taste of what's in store for him. Wasn't he supposed to be here by now?" Pascoe lit the cigar and offered it to his nephew.

Theo took a whiff, turned green, and waved it away. "I'll not go to Aster stinking of tobacco. Erran sent word he's been held up at Newcastle by some election matter. He should be here any day."

Pascoe would never pry the countess away from the next babe to be born, unless he kidnapped her. He could see his hope of knighthood fading with the sunlight. He lit a lamp.

"I don't suppose you know of a good way of sending Lady Carstairs back to Northbridge, do you?"

Theo snorted and finished his brandy. "Persuade Aster and Celeste to send her. They take orders from no man. I'm going downstairs. I can't stand waiting any longer."

Just as he opened the door, a piercing wail of agony shattered the melodic chant.

The faint cry of an infant followed.

Theo took off running, clattering like a herd of horses down the stairs.

Pascoe puffed his cigar and wondered if he dared defy the superstitious ladies' spirits by following.

Only, it wasn't the infant that drew him—it was the countess.

CHAPTER 13

BUOYANT at the successful delivery of Lady Aster's daughter, Bridey cast aside her apron, washed, and left Celeste and the nursemaids with the happy couple to coo over the family's new addition.

She could still rejoice in the birth of new life, even if she knew it was unlikely that she'd ever bear a babe of own. This night, she wished to rejoice that an early birth could be so healthy and beautiful. Lady Aster's and Lord Theo's happiness was a wonder to behold, and she held the warmth close to her heart, letting it heat her blood. *This* was why she'd taken up her grandfather's work.

Giving the maids time to carry up the water for her bath, Bridey went upstairs to the nursery to see if the commotion below had disturbed the twins. The wind blowing through the old chimneys and the haunting song of the Malcolm ceremonies coursed through her veins, heightening all her senses. She understood why they called this old castle magical. She'd never felt quite so alive. A bath would help her settle, she hoped.

As she reached the top of the stairs, Mr. Pascoe was just closing the door to the nursery. Her heart pounded harder, and the heat rising in her had everything to do with him and nothing to do with common sense. She froze in place instead of fleeing.

He didn't even smile at sight of her, but strode down the corridor as if this moment were inevitable. She wanted to curse him for not heeding her warnings. Instead, the naughty voice in the back of her head asked what would it hurt? Even in the unlikely event that she conceived, she couldn't carry it to term. The loss was heartbreaking, yes, but for just this once. . . She needed release. He needed the same. . . .

Pascoe's dark hair fell over his brow as if he'd been running his hand through it. But his pristine neckcloth was unrumpled, and he'd donned elegant tailored black for evening. The coat emphasized the width of his shoulders and the narrowness of his hips, and the trousers. . .

Bridey gulped and forced her gaze down to his thighs. The tight fabric revealed thick muscles proving Mr. Pascoe spent a great deal of time on horses. He walked with the authority of a man familiar with the halls of royalty—with assurance and determination. He might be a confused father, but without the fussiness of monocles and walking

sticks, he was all male animal.

He didn't do so much as ask permission. He simply wrapped her waist in his hard arms, lifted her from her feet, and kissed her. He kissed her with the heat of a bonfire and a desire that swelled with her own.

In the back of her head, she knew magic was happening and simply didn't care. His embrace was exactly what the moment demanded. She hungered for his touch so much that she couldn't have stopped had servants shouted *Fire!* She clung to his shoulders and matched his kiss with a lust she hadn't expressed in all her lonely life. One night—if she could have just one night of being truly alive. . .

Pressing kisses along her jaw, Mr. Pascoe swung her up in his arms and clattered down the stairs as if someone actually had shouted fire. He reached the bedchamber floor with the sure foot of a mountain goat.

In the distance, the new infant cried and family murmured. The corridors hummed with spirit voices echoing the songs of earlier. Cold drafts rustled her skirts, and Bridey could feel the air thicken with expectation, while excitement vibrated the walls. Irresistible *magic*, of a kind she'd never known.

She insisted that he put her feet down so they could hurry toward her chamber before anyone saw them.

Inside, the bath she ordered steamed in front of a low coal fire. Wordlessly, Pascoe swung her around and began unfastening her bodice. She should protest at least a little, but if she didn't speak. . . She could almost pretend this was a dream.

She wanted him. She wanted the bath. She had no notion of how to go about seduction. Her only knowledge was in evading male lust, not accepting it, so letting him take the lead suited her. Once the back of her bodice was open, she held the fabric across her breasts and swung around to face him. The heat in his eyes nearly incinerated her.

"I warned you," she reminded him in a whisper, because her conscience wouldn't allow less.

"I want you," he retorted without argument. "If you wish to blame the spirits for what we do here, that's your choice."

He wanted her—he found her *desirable*. It had been so very long since she'd felt like more than a wooden effigy. . . Heat flushed through her. With shaking fingers, she untied her skirt and petticoats, while he ripped at his neckcloth and struggled out of his coat. That he seemed to want this as much as she did gave her courage.

His gaze never left her, as hers never left him.

When she had married, her husband had still been large and strong, but he'd been over fifty, with the flabbiness and wrinkles time wrought. She doubted that George had ever been as well-muscled as

Aaron Pascoe-Ives. Pascoe's shirt was silk instead of linen, and it clung lovingly to a sculpted chest and thick arms. He had apparently found someone to change his shoulder bandage to a much smaller one, barely visible through the fabric. Without the neckcloth, she could see a dark patch of hair curling over the neck opening. Her nether regions grew damp in anticipation as she dropped her gaze to follow his hands unfastening his trousers.

She froze again at the formidable bulge forming there. Could she really do this?

He stopped what he was doing and grabbed her chemise to tug it over her head. "I need your beauty," he murmured. "I need to touch and smell and see." Leaving his trousers only partially unfastened, he ran his rough hands over her bare arms, soothing the chill bumps. "It's been too long since I held a woman. Forgive me if I go too fast."

He could not go fast enough, but the words stuck to her tongue. Just to be caressed with gentleness was almost sensory overload. Enthralled, Bridey let him unfasten her corset with long, competent fingers. In moments, she stood only in shift, drawers, and stockings. She darted a look at the bath. . . She would feel much better if she knew she was clean. Hours of helping an infant into the world was hard, sweaty work.

As if reading her mind, Pascoe set her on the edge of the bed and kneeled to remove her stockings. When he ran kisses along the naked limbs he uncovered, from thigh to foot, she nearly came up off the bed in shock. By time her toes were bare, she had forgotten the bath. When he sucked a toe, she bit her lip to keep from screaming.

She would have fallen over and spread her legs for him right then, except he stood and lifted her to her feet again. She whimpered, not wanting the coldness of separation, but he continued undressing her, until she stood before him completely naked, while he still wore his trousers and shirt. The fire of desire in his eyes kept her from diving for the covers.

George had looked at her with lust in the first year of their marriage, when she'd been a mere sixteen, so she knew a little of the power of her femininity. But years of disgust and antipathy afterward had worn away the memory. Now, beneath the gaze of a man she ought to fear and despise, she thrilled with anticipation, with the understanding of what she was doing to him.

As if drawn to her by magnet, Pascoe cupped her breasts and bent to lavish her with hungry kisses.

He of the powerful mind was as helpless as she. She could blame it on the spirits and the magic of Wystan, but the electricity was all theirs and had been from the first moment they'd met. Dangerous auras and incompatible goals did not affect lust.

With trembling hands, she tugged at his shirt until he removed it. Delighting in the chiseled musculature revealed, she rubbed her hands over his brown torso, watching his masculine nipples peak. He was so very *hard*. . .

He lifted her by the waist and lowered her into the steaming water. “Thaw, my frost queen, we have all night.”

The water had been gently scented with oil of roses, and Bridey sank into the warmth with gratitude. She’d not noticed the aches and tension until they melted away in the steam. She closed her eyes and tried to focus her swirling thoughts, but her body was too aroused and impatient. *Need* filled her mind.

She nearly leapt from the bath when Pascoe joined her, planting his big feet on either side of her limbs and sitting opposite her so their legs tangled most obscenely. His arousal was pronounced and undaunted by the hot water. She tried hard not to stare.

“We have tubs in Iveston that allow two people to sit side by side,” he said without an ounce of shame as he picked up her soap and lathered her breasts. “I’ve always wondered what it would be like to take a woman there.”

Despite the breathtaking intimacy of what he was doing, he kept the moment impersonal, and she was almost grateful. They were *not* lovers, could never be lovers, even though every stroke tugged at her womb, leaving her longing for everything he could offer. If she could simply think of this as similar to birthing—a natural, animal act—she could participate without guilt.

If only she knew more about the unfamiliar role she played now. . . Although to her relief, it was obvious she did not need to encourage Pascoe’s performance as she had with her late husband.

She unwrapped his bandage and examined his wound. “It heals nicely,” she said with approval, before taking the soap and lathering a cloth for him. He took the cloth, but his gaze never left her as she lifted her breasts and used the soap to wash under them. Her nipples were puckered so tight that she thought if he did not touch them again, she would expire of need.

She’d never known visual foreplay, or much of foreplay at all. She thought she might go up in steam as Pascoe soaped himself slowly, plastering whorls of dark hair to his chest, lifting his heavy arousal to cleanse his balls. Her insides clenched and wept with desire.

She held out until she’d soaped away the night’s sweat and anxiety and the water began to cool. Then she brazenly stood and washed between her legs—aroused, ready, and willing.

Pascoe was not a man who needed words. He placed his big hands around her waist and yanked her down over him.



ENGORGED to the point of erupting, Pascoe fought a cry of victory as he slid deep into Lady Carstairs. She struggled only briefly in shock, then lifted herself to a better position and took him deeper. A moan formed in his throat, matched only by hers as he bent to suckle at her breasts.

She came undone silently, clinging to his wet shoulders, heaving to the music that vibrated the walls. He held back, letting her come, letting her gather her resources for another round, because he didn't think he could ever let her go.

Her hips were the perfect width for his hands. Her breasts were just heavy enough to crush into his chest and pillow him. He needed her in bed, her flesh touching him all over. But mostly, he needed to bury himself inside her and stay there for eternity.

He kissed her thoroughly, attending to all the sensitive places with the detailed efficiency he applied to his profession. He massaged her nipples into need again and was rewarded with the pulse of blood where they joined. When she whimpered against his mouth, he caressed the bud between her legs, and her inner muscles clenched around him. He thrust deeper, and she eagerly moved with him.

The walls sang. The air vibrated with expectation. He lost his mind and his seed and spewed so deep inside her that he feared he'd harmed her, until she bit his shoulder and shuddered in tandem with him, fighting moans of pleasure.

Satisfaction swept him. She smelled of lust and heaven. He'd known this woman was perfect, even though he'd yet to analyze why or how. He grabbed a towel toasty from the fire and wrapped her in it so he could carry her to the bed. He didn't entirely grasp why she'd been so willing tonight, but if he could, he'd treat her well enough that she'd welcome him again. He thought their bath might have been the most erotic experience of his life. He'd always been too single-minded to waste his limited coin on brothels or courtesans.

"Shall I stay?" he asked as he lay her down between the cold sheets.

She slid her lovely hands over his shoulders to tug him down. The brain in his head squeaked a warning, but his lower parts had better ideas.

They made love with the hunger of the insatiable. They spoke little. Fearing he'd have only this one night, Pascoe sought to make it the most memorable of both their lives.

By dawn, she was matching him trick for trick and dared to force him back to the bed so she could cover him. Pascoe laughed in delight and stroked her bobbing breasts as she pleased herself. Then he turned her over and drove deep.

If she, who knew more of female bodies than he, did not fear the results of their lovemaking, then he saw no reason to deny himself the reward for his exertions by remaining inside her welcoming body.

As light crept gray through the narrow windows, the walls stopped their excited humming, and even the squalling infant grew quiet. Pascoe leaned over to kiss his no-longer-frosty countess.

"Whatever comes of this night, I wish to know," he told her.

An odd light flickered in her eyes as she gazed up at him, then down at her belly where she splayed her hand. "White light," she murmured in awe and dismay. "I see a white light where I was empty."

What the devil? A knot formed in Pascoe's throat, and his diplomat's tongue froze as he tried to see what she saw. He'd read enough Malcolm freakishness to know she did not say this because she was crazed. That did not mean she didn't manipulate him.

She turned the shining green of her eyes to him for a moment, then let her long lashes close over them. "You and the Wystan spirits have accomplished the improbable. It remains to be seen if the magic holds. I am not sure whether to weep or rejoice."

"After last night, you have me in the palm of your hand. I will give you anything you want," he said, meaning it, although he feared he'd lost his wits. He didn't really know or understand this woman, but he still wanted her, even admitting that their separate lives would make them both miserable.

"Do not make that promise lightly," she chided. "I want many things, and most of them oppose the law. For now, let us pretend we are normal and not moon-crazed, please."

"You use honesty like a blunt instrument," he complained.

She pulled the covers up to her chin, forcing him upright. She blatantly admired his nudity even as she pushed him away. "It is a pity our paths go in different directions."

She was right, but he wouldn't admit it while his cock rose to the occasion. Knowing this wasn't the time to argue, Pascoe performed a modest bow, then pulled the dressing screen around the tub so he could wash and dress until he was decent again.

He fretted at the meaning of "white light" but knew enough of women not to pry. Sharing a bed did not mean they shared a common understanding. When he came out from behind the screen, she had donned a robe and pinned her hair into a loose cap of rich auburn at her crown. He leaned over and kissed her creamy cheek.

"You look more royal than a queen, even in dishabille," he murmured.

"Considering the size and age of the queens you may have known, that is small compliment," she said dryly.

“The Frost Queen has returned,” he said, grinning. “I think I like her. I would like her more if she’d help me with Carstairs.”

“I am done with Northbridge and Carstairs. My life is here now. I am sure you are paid well to do whatever it is you do, so go do it.” She stepped behind the dressing screen and left him to see himself out.

Romantic, his queen was not, which was probably a very good thing. Whistling, Pascoe stepped into an already bustling household.

Considering the early hour, he narrowed his eyes at the unusual commotion and hastened for the stairs up to the nursery.

CHAPTER 14

So THOROUGHLY SHAKEN by the night's events that she wasn't certain she could meet the day, Bridey let her maid choose her gown and fix her hair. Even when she was ready, she dallied over a cup of tea, making notes in her journal about the recent birth.

If only Pascoe didn't want her to help him with Carstairs. . . Or he wasn't a traveling man with a duty to uphold the law. . . Or she wasn't determined to build a school for women that would have the kingdom prepared to burn her at the stake. . . She was acting like a foolish schoolgirl with her first *tendre*.

Last night had been a miracle, yes, opening her eyes to the beauty of the act between man and woman—that didn't mean she must fall for the first man who taught her. She was wise enough to know Pascoe would not even remember her after he returned to London.

Every so often, she placed her hand over her womb. Did she imagine the heat there? She'd read the journals of Malcolm women who swore they felt spirits enter the new life inside them. Bridey couldn't say she'd felt that. But the white aura. . . wasn't hers.

She wouldn't do anything just yet, she decided. Even if the impossible had happened, even if Pascoe's seed had found fertile ground where previously there had been little, she had seen those seeds washed away before a babe could grow. She'd wept after burying a tiny, unformed fetus. She'd not been able to conceive again after the miscarriage. It was foolish to feel hope at this stage.

Concentrating on the bliss of last night's lovemaking and not any possible result, Bridey ventured out of her room to visit the new mother.

There seemed to be an unusual amount of servant activity as she passed the empty chambers between hers and the large suite at the far end of the castle hall. Silent maids raced in and out and up and down looking a bit anxious. Perhaps Lord Erran had arrived?

Not stopping to ask, she entered the suite's open salon where Celeste was cooing over the infant. Bridey could hear Theo's baritone in his wife's bedchamber. She saw no sign of the usual bevy of nursemaids and lady's maids, however.

"Do we have a name yet?" Bridey asked, peeking at the blissful babe already sucking its tiny thumb.

"The discussion is ongoing," Celeste said in amusement. "At

present, there is the question of a meteor shower in the heavens after the babe's birth, and some alignment of the planets that must be considered. But she sucks and eliminates heartily, so all is well."

Bridey longed to hold the infant, but thought it best if the next new mother enjoyed the experience in anticipation of the impending arrival. "And how are you doing this morning?"

"I am healthy and ready to have one of these for my own. But I don't intend to do so until that errant husband of mine arrives, so you may relax for a few weeks. I don't suppose you have seen Pascoe's twins? The nursemaid apparently turned her back, and they have gone missing again."

"Oh dear." Remembering the pair arriving at Northbridge with a delivery driver, Bridey thought it best to find out more.

She found no one in the nursery to tell her when they'd last been seen or where. *Perhaps*. . . if she left her mind open to auras, she could discover their hiding place. She opened her inner eye but saw no trace of them or their mother in the nursery.

A thorough search would have to start at the top and work down, she supposed. If Theo was with Aster, then he wouldn't be disturbed if she started in the tower. Or the roof. Panicking at that last thought, Bridey lifted her skirt and ran up the shallow stone stairs.

The day was windy but bright. Sun poured in the tower windows, so she had to concentrate to see anything as rarified as the twins' white auras. And outside on the roof. . . she wouldn't have a chance of seeing more than their physical bodies if they were out in the open. She wished she knew if anyone had looked there yet. Deciding it wouldn't hurt to try, she went to the landing where several old cloaks hung, donned one, and stepped out onto the flat castle ramparts.

The pigeons were kept in a sheltered spot between chimneys—an ideal hiding place for children. She would need to tell Theo to lock the landing door. But it was Pascoe she found up here, not the twins.

"I wanted to help look for the children," she said when he saw her.

He tucked a pigeon into a cage with a handful of feed and—damn the man—pocketed a message tube. Since she could think of no one but her brother sending messages by pigeon, she held out her hand.

Glaring, he retrieved the tube from his pocket. "I was hoping Fin had consented to help me, since you will not."

She unfurled the scrap of paper, read it, and showed it to him. *The miners have walked out*. That was Fin's doing, she knew, but there was no need to share that. She grimaced at the rest of the message: *They are shooting at Oscar*.

Bridey tried not to think that it was a shame they apparently missed. That was cruel.

Pascoe grimaced at the news. "My chance of a title rides on the whims of a king and his godsons, and the economy of the kingdom depends on iron ore pouring into transportation. I should be up there and not here chasing my damned children."

"I support the livelihoods of working men over the pockets of the wealthy," she said, drawing the line as plainly as she could. "But I can help with the twins. Where have you looked?"

"I have the maids searching the kitchen and cellars. But if they follow their usual pattern, the brats will hear them coming and find new hiding places where the servants have already searched. It's a game to them. I thought I'd check up here since I've already discovered them with the pigeons once. But no luck." He held out his arm to escort her back inside.

"There are too many staircases to guard them all," she said in dismay. "How will we possibly find them?"

"We won't. That's how they escaped last time. Everyone thought they were somewhere else until they were long gone. If they're here, they'll show up when they're hungry, but they've already had breakfast." He tried to speak pragmatically, but Bridey heard the despair in his voice.

"Do you have people guarding the castle exits?" she asked.

"Do you have any idea where they all are?" He took the narrow staircase down first, leaving her to follow. "I'm not even certain. But I've ordered stable boys to guard all the ones they know. Unlike your brother's house, this place ceased to be a fortress centuries ago."

"So if they haven't already left the building, then we may trap them by searching from floor to floor, one at a time, and then blocking all the stairs?"

He shrugged. "It might take an army, and even then, we cannot possibly see behind all the furniture and in all the wardrobes. Remember, this is an old game to them, and this castle is considerably larger and more entertaining than my modest townhome."

"I am beginning to understand why you can't keep nursemaids," she said grimly. "Do you have any notion of *why* they do this?"

"Until just recently, they have not spoken, so no, I don't. I'd simply come home from a business journey and find the servants at their wits' end. Usually, the nursemaid or governess had already packed her bags and fled. I try to be philosophical about this now, but those first few times. . ."

"Your wrath was a terrible thing to behold, thus giving the servants incentive to flee before you had them beheaded," she said.

"Something of the sort, yes. It is hard to imagine infants, barely out of napkins and able to toddle, disappearing so thoroughly that a few adults cannot find them. It's just not fathomable."

She could tell him that children, like cats, were fast and sneaky, and their mother could tell them when someone was coming, but he didn't want to hear that.

They were now on the attic floor containing the nursery and the servants' quarters. Determined to be systematic, Bridey opened the first door. Praying that the spirits in Wystan were kindly ones, she sought auras and found none. Her gift opened her to possession if a spirit was aggressive enough. Only Fin had saved her from the one at Northbridge. She shivered in memory, but the children were more important than defending herself from *potential* spirits.

"They could hide under the beds," Pascoe pointed out when she did no more than open and shut doors.

"I would see their auras," she said with confidence. "If their mother is hovering, she would be even more visible. I wish she'd leave them and come search for you, but spirits are simply too mindless." She double-checked the nursery, but they hadn't reappeared.

"You can see them if they're under beds?" he asked dubiously, keeping watch on the corridor as she opened and closed doors.

"Do you believe me?" she asked, needing him to say yes.

"I don't want to," he admitted. "The world is full of enough troublesome live people without adding in the dead. Do you see auras all the time?"

Ever the diplomat, he wouldn't disagree even if he disagreed. She grimaced but saw no reason not to be honest. "I don't like to look," she admitted. "Opening one's mind to that extent invites trouble."

"Trouble?" he inquired, his brow pulling down in a frown. "What kind? We have enough as it is."

Since he wasn't willing to fully believe, she waved off the complicated explanation. "We need to know if your children are in the house before searching the countryside. Have you considered putting bells on them?"

He laughed unhappily. "They remove anything that makes noise. I apparently do not have stupid children."

"No, of course you don't. And their two minds together must be formidable. Have they ever been separated?" Having exhausted the attic, Bridey started down the stairs to the bedchamber floor.

"I've asked the nursemaids to try, but they haven't been particularly successful. You realize they could be going up the servant stairs as we're going down these?" He remained at the top of the stairs, keeping an eye on the far staircase.

Bridey summoned a maid in the main corridor and sent her to stand at the top of the stairs so Pascoe could come down. "The wings of the top floor have been sealed off, so the attic is the only floor with limited access and a main corridor. From here on out, the rooms are

rabbit warrens. The staircases are all we can guard. If you'll station servants at all of them, I'll start on the back wing farthest from Aster's chambers. Surely there is enough activity on her end to keep them away."

Bridey could tell from his frown that he didn't like her taking charge, but she didn't leave him time to argue. Most of the upper story bedchambers were unused. She swept through salons and sheet-covered rooms of no purpose. Not finding any sign of the children under covers or in empty rooms, Bridey reached her own chamber in the middle of the rambling castle. She knew the children hadn't been there an hour ago when she'd left, but if Pascoe was right that they doubled back. . .

And there they were in the center of her rumpled bed, not even attempting to hide. They looked up at her with angelic expressions. She crossed her arms and scowled—as much at the pink hovering over them as at the twins.

"I have not had my breakfast because of you," she told them.

"Do you have a doggie?" Edward asked. "We want a doggie."

"Children who frighten their parents and maids by disappearing do not deserve doggies. Why are you here?"

She watched as the two seemed to exchange anxious glances, make some silent decision, and scrambled from the bed. They placed their hands behind their backs and gazed up at her with adoration. Bridey was not fooled. Their auras rippled. She shut down her inner eye and waited.

"Will you come home with us? We promise to be good," Edward piped.

By this time, Pascoe had apparently noticed her stillness. She heard his heavy footsteps behind her. Not acknowledging the absurd question, Bridey gestured at their father. "Edward, I want you to apologize to your father for causing him to worry. He will decide your punishment. Emma, come with me, I will take you to the kitchen so you may apologize to all the servants whose day you have ruined. They will decide yours." She held out her hand, brooking no refusal.

The twins finally looked worried.

Pascoe appeared startled at the notion of taking charge of his son, but at Bridey's fierce glare, he took Edward's hand. Bridey took his daughter's.

The girl dragged her feet all the way down the stairs, but Bridey kept tugging. She sensed Emma was nearly in a panic by the time they reached the cellar. Even knowing she had no right to interfere, Bridey would not stop in her purpose. She'd been fretting for an entire hour. And she was *hungry*. That didn't make her any more sympathetic.

The few servants left tending the fires looked up in relief at their

entrance.

"If you can, send for the others Miss Emma has caused to leave their duties," Bridey told them.

Wide-eyed and still panicky, the child stood where Bridey planted her, watching as servants trailed into the kitchen. When Bridey deemed there were sufficient for an apology, she pointed at the hearth. "Stand there, make a curtsy, and apologize as best as you can. If you do it well enough, your punishment might not be too stiff."

Emma stood where ordered and performed a perfect obeisance, but she didn't seem capable of speaking.

"Start with *I am sorry*," Bridey suggested.

The servants shifted from foot to foot, unaccustomed to the family descending among them or to any apologies at all.

"I am very sorry," Emma piped, actually sounding apologetic. "I wanted my new mama. I did not mean to hurt you."

Maids wiped tears from their eyes. Bridey rolled hers, but she could not expect more from a four-year old, no matter how precocious.

"Ladies, is there anything you'd like to say to Miss Emma to make her see how wrong it is for her to leave the nursery without one of you with her?"

One of the Marys tried to look stern. "You worried us, Miss Emma. We thought we might lose our positions for losing you. I have a sick mother at home who depends on me. Do you understand that?"

Emma looked almost frightened. "Your mama is sick? Can I come visit her?"

Bridey swore under her breath. No wonder no one ever punished the brats. Well, if her intent was to keep them separated for a while, this would work as well as any. "Is your mother in Wystan, Mary? If so, would you take the day off, take Emma with you, and introduce her to your mother? Perhaps she can carry some bread and jam to her."

Mary looked stunned but nodded and curtsied. Emma looked anxious. She probably hadn't counted on being called to honor her request, if it was possible to believe a child her age could plot at all.

"Then that's settled. Emma, you will stay here with Mary. Everyone else must return to all the duties you interrupted. I, for one, would like my breakfast." Bridey turned to leave.

"But what about Edward?" the child cried plaintively.

"I'm sure your father won't heave him out a window," Bridey said callously. "You need only worry about yourself for now."

Feeling like an executioner, Bridey hurried up the stairs. It wasn't her duty to fix anyone's problems, and that's how she wanted it. But she couldn't let those adorable children be turned into monsters

because no one understood their uniqueness—except their mother. And maybe other Malcolms, had they the time or incentive to bother, which they didn't.

Their mother. . . Bridey turned for one last glimpse of Emma and opened her inner eye.

The pink aura hovered frantically near the ceiling, torn between her three charges.

CHAPTER 15

How DID one *punish* a four-year old? Pascoe had happily shot villains, provided savage justice for wrongdoers, and thrown malefactors into prison to rot. He'd robbed thieves, had bad barons banished to the colonies, and just recently threatened an earl with hanging.

He'd never punished a curly-haired imp with huge blue eyes that reminded him too forcefully of his late wife. That's why he'd spent an inordinate amount of his income on *servants*, confound it.

Edward obediently took his hand and stamped his tiny feet up all the stairs and back to the nursery. Below, the infant had begun to wail its hunger. Once upon a time, Edward had been that tiny infant, and Pascoe had been prouder of him than anything he'd ever done. But apparently just producing a son wasn't sufficient. One had to *raise* him.

"I believe Lady Carstairs says you must apologize to me," Pascoe said stiffly as he released him in the nursery. "And it is probably wise to apologize to Mary, whom you frightened half to death."

"I apologize, sir," the boy said, bowing a bit clumsily. "We wished to see our new mother and ask for a doggie. We've never had one." His little darling's glare was almost accusing.

Their *new mother*. . . They'd been in Lady Carstairs' room—*Bridey's* room. After what they'd done last night, Pascoe couldn't think of her as another man's widow, but he certainly didn't think of her as mother to the twins. She was still so very young. . . But now was not the time to reflect on alabaster skin and luscious curves. . . and intransigent, rebellious temperaments. And he wasn't about to debate fairy tales with the infant set.

"I cannot ask servants to take care of a dog when they cannot take care of you," Pascoe pointed out with indisputable logic. He'd argued with *kings*. Surely, he could put a child in his place.

"Our new mother will take care of us. Emma and I will take care of a doggie." Edward didn't flinch in the least in facing him.

Pascoe wanted to mutter about unnatural children, but he couldn't hide his pride in how his son stood up to him at the tender age of four. He couldn't remember being so self-confident at that age, although he'd just lost his mother and been thrown into the zoo that was Iveston about that time.

"Lady Carstairs has not consented to be your mother." How the

devil did the children know about her anyway? “And she is not likely to if she knows it involves chasing you up and down stairs before breakfast.”

Pascoe reeled as he recognized what he’d just intimated. Aside from the difference in their ages and dispositions, he wasn’t prepared for another marriage. His late wife had hated his traveling, and he wouldn’t be giving it up any time soon. Bridey was accustomed to managing an entire estate and acting as physician for a village. A modest town house in London would not suit her abilities. Besides, he needed propriety to earn a title, and Bridey was headed in a dangerously different direction.

A Frost Queen for his children?

No, the thought was impossible. So why did the children insist on it—even *before they knew her*? Uneasiness ate at him.

Edward pouted, finally showing his age. “We promise to be good. She *has* to be our mother. Our mama says so.”

Oh, that way madness lies. . . He’d spent too much time around Shakespeare-quoting Ashford. Running his hand over his hair, Pascoe sought a way around illogic. “Your mama cannot speak, Edward. I wish you would stop this nonsense of pretending she does.”

“She does so, too,” his son said, pouting out his lower lip. “She talks to Emma all the time. Emma gets scared,” he admitted. “And mama sings to her.”

One of the Marys hurried into the nursery. At sight of Pascoe, she bobbed a hasty curtsy.

He had a mine and furnace to put back into operation if he wished to keep his position and continue supporting his children. Arguing with a child was not rational. But the idea of his tiny daughter being frightened. . .

Pascoe gestured at the nursemaid to stay back. “Why is Emma scared?”

Edward shrugged. “She sees things.”

That wasn’t a bit of help—unless one believed in witchy Malcolm behavior. Again, his gut knotted.

Did he really want to know what kinds of things children imagined? No.

Ordering himself to stop being irrational, Pascoe returned to the practical. Back to punishment. The only kind he could remember receiving was a stick to the backs of his legs. He wasn’t beating his child with a stick!

“You are to stay in the nursery with Mary all day, or you shall go to bed hungry tonight, understood?”

“Where is Emma?” the boy asked, almost pitifully.

Ah, there was the punishment Bridey was inflicting—separating

the naughty pair. He had to admire her methods, if not her attitude. “She will not be allowed up here until Lady Carstairs says so. The two of you find too much mischief together.”

Edward looked truly troubled. Pascoe didn’t think the boy could explain why. He’d find Bridey and see if she had any more good ideas about dealing with the pair.

And then he needed to ride to Northbridge.



BRIDEY WAS FINISHING her eggs and toast as Pascoe strode into the downstairs dining salon, dressed for riding. She set down her fork to admire him, and suffered a thrill of excitement when he stopped in the doorway to do the same to her. His mouth turned up in a suggestive smile that shot straight to her middle. He’d shaved, and she realized he’d arrived without a valet. Even though he was the son of a marquess, he was a man accustomed to taking care of himself and adapting to his surroundings—more reason to admire him.

“I have sent Emma to the village with bread and jam for her nursemaid’s mother. It’s not much of a punishment, but it’s never too early for them to learn how their actions affect others.” She picked up her cup again and tried to act casual as Pascoe filled a plate and took the seat beside her.

She could smell his spicy shaving soap, but most of all, she knew the scent of him. It clung to her skin even though she’d washed thoroughly, and knew he had as well. She was simply aware, and excited by, his masculinity. She had never understood how intoxicating flesh against flesh could be.

“Separating them may be punishment enough.” He sat down and tore a huge bite out of his toast, as if he were angry enough to chew nails. “Edward says Emma is often scared, but he cannot tell me why.”

Bridey frowned. “If she is a sensitive, there could be many reasons. I’ve been reading the journals, but she’s so young, it would be difficult to have her explain. But obviously, one or the other of them is hearing your wife’s voice.”

“I don’t want to believe that,” he said stubbornly. “Besides, that shouldn’t scare her. If I’m to believe in the impossible, Edward says Lily sings Emma to sleep when she’s scared.” He sounded confused and a bit weary as he said this. “I cannot possibly understand.”

She dared to pat his hand. “No, but you have the Malcolm ladies to help you. Let them.”

He viciously tore off more toast and chewed silently. When he was finished, he sent her a skeptical look. “The twins think you will be their new mother. And that you will provide them with a dog. Is *Lily*

telling them that?" His voice reeked of skepticism.

His lack of belief built the barrier she needed. Henceforth, she refused to lie about what she knew.

"I doubt that spirits can tell the future." The possibility rattled her, but she preferred to believe that spirits were irrational and fates weren't sealed. "But even Aster's astrological predictions aren't precise," she said, to bridge the raging river of doubt. "We cannot expect the twins to understand. Just try to keep an open mind."

She didn't *want* to be a mother if it meant giving up the larger scope of teaching other women how to take care of themselves, their children, and each other. Pascoe risked his future just by speaking to her.

He squeezed her hand, cast a look to see if anyone was watching, then kissed her cheek. "My mind is only on you at the moment. I cannot think of aught else, and that is not good. I need to leave for Northbridge and keep the king's godsons from being murdered. If you will not go with me, will you look after the twins?"

While her woman's heart beat faster at his sentiment, she had wasted a lifetime on oblivious, selfish men. She reminded him of her own purpose. "I must stay here and watch over Aster and the new infant. These first few days are critical to their health. I will keep an eye on the twins, if I can. If you cannot persuade Fin to talk to you, then talk to the upper servants. I'll send a message with you. I'm not sure whose side they are on anymore, but I think Barker can be trusted."

She should object that he took advantage of her already, but she would have looked after the twins even if he had not asked. That he thought of his children at all merely made her approve of him more.

She was in deep trouble if she started excusing a man who admitted he used her. Still, if he could right what was wrong without arresting Fin. . .

"You are not thinking of keeping Darrow in charge?" she asked warily.

"I am thinking of shoving him down a mine shaft and closing it up with his silly brother as door, but that is probably not a practical solution." He threw his tea back as if it were whiskey.

Bridey laughed. Sharing her frustration somehow made it less insurmountable.

He took her hand again and kissed it. "You are probably very bad for me, but your laughter makes my day brighter. Don't let my brats turn off that smile. Stuff them down a mine shaft if they do."

She laughed again. She hadn't felt quite so light-hearted in. . . Since childhood, most likely. "I shall do no such thing. I shall experiment with them to see if they know where you are and what

you are doing.”

He snorted and stood up, his breakfast having miraculously been inhaled. “At this point, I would not doubt that they read minds and foresee the future. I’ll send a pigeon if anything interesting happens.”

“Like being shot?” she asked, just to scare off that ghost in her head. “Better let Mrs. Mac know you’re there, if so.” She rose. “Let me write that note before you leave. I’ll be in the library.” She escaped before he could touch her more and turn her into melted butter.

When Pascoe appeared in the library, dressed for riding, with his hat under his arm, she hastily handed him the note she’d prepared. Using the cry of the infant above as excuse, she all but fled his presence.

Oil and water, cat and mouse, she reminded herself as she examined the newborn later. Perhaps she had unfairly judged men by her limited exposure. That didn’t mean she must fall for the first real gentleman she’d met. Mr. Pascoe-Ives had made it clear that his importance as the king’s envoy was paramount, and that home and family counted for little in his life.

She would not be treated as furniture ever again, and he would inevitably do so.

Hours after Pascoe had ridden away, Bridey gave herself permission to check on his son. She prayed Emma was still with the nursemaid in the village. In the nursery, she found Edward restlessly pacing from window to window—which required climbing up on dressers and chairs and tables since the windows were high and small.

Mary sent her a nervous look. “He will not settle. I have tried to read a book and showed him the soldiers and the rocking horse, but he will not sit.”

“Why don’t you run down and have a bite to eat and leave him with me for a while?” Curiosity more than sympathy drove her, Bridey knew. Was the boy searching for his sister? His mother?

Mary bobbed a curtsy and hastened away before Bridey could change her mind.

“You will not be able to see Emma from there,” Bridey told him. “You cannot even see the village.”

“I can almost hear her.” Edward hopped down from the chair. “If I promise not to be naughty, may I go outside?”

It did seem a shame to be cooped up when the day was so bright. Did he really believe he could *hear* his sister from a distance? How might she understand what went on inside a child’s head? “Do your nursemaids usually take you to the park on nice days?”

He thought about it. “Sometimes. But they think we need leashes like horses. I would like a horse someday, but I would not like to be leashed.”

“Horses have reins so their riders can tell them where they wish to go. Leashes are for restraining animals likely to run away. I would not like a leash either. Shall we go down and see if there are any horses in the stable today?”

She didn't know what made her say it, but the boy lit the room with the power of a thousand candles.

“May we, please?”

Those big dark-lashed eyes were impossible to refuse. She might worry that he knew mind tricks, except she'd been the one to suggest the stable first. “You cannot leave my sight, you understand? It's your vanishing act that makes the nursemaids reluctant to take you out without leashes.”

He nodded and took her hand.

The child was as appealing as his father, in totally different ways. He would devastate the female population with his charm in another decade or so.

She led him down the back way to the stable. Her old mare, the castle pony, and the carriage horses ate their hay and stomped as they entered. A cat ran for the loft.

“May I touch?” Edward asked, standing beneath the mare's nose.

“There will be dried apples in the bin by the door. She would like one of those. I'll show you how to feed her.”

The boy did as told and held up his palm with the apple as instructed. “Her tooth hurts,” he said worriedly as the old mare snapped up the withered fruit.

About to suggest he pat the mare's nose, Bridey froze instead. *Her tooth hurts?*

“How do you know her tooth hurts?” she asked without inflection as she showed him how to pat the horse.

“I hear her. She does not use words though,” he said with concern, gentling the mare as if he'd been raised in a stall.

“Do you hear the other horses?” Bridey peeled back the mare's lip to examine her deteriorating teeth.

“They're just curious,” he said. “And they want apples too.”

Any child might say that, Bridey knew. Edward and Emma were probably quite imaginative. But one of her mare's teeth did look as if it might be infected. She gestured at one of the stable hands to look and let Edward feed apples to the other animals.

“May I see the kittens?” he asked. “Emma would like a kitten.”

“What kittens?” Bridey heard nothing and had seen no more than the barn cat hunting for mice.

“The ones the mama cat is feeding,” he said, frowning. “I think they are up there.” He pointed at the loft.

“Mama cat had a litter a few weeks back,” the stable hand said.

“We been putting milk out for her.”

Edward could have heard the servants talking about the kittens. Or he might have better hearing than she did. But there had been Malcolms who talked to animals. . .

She helped him climb into the loft to look for the kittens. “Mama will guard them fiercely. Don’t go too close or she might scratch.”

“She’s afraid,” he said as he settled in the hay far enough to see the kittens but not close enough for scratching. “The littlest is hungry though.”

Bridey wasn’t wearing a gown meant for climbing through lofts. She did so anyway. She wasn’t an animal physic, but she’d been raised in the country and knew about the runts of litters.

Sure enough, there was a wee one curled up in the straw while its bigger siblings climbed over it to get at the mama cat. Edward was not old enough to understand about runts. How could he possibly have known about this one?

“Have you been up here before?” she asked, holding out her hand for mama cat to sniff.

“Emma is afraid of horses. Girls are afraid of everything,” he said in scorn.

That didn’t answer the question—except in *his* head. He went nowhere without Emma, until today. Thus, he had never been in the loft before or seen the kittens.

She might be making too much of this. Keeping one hand near mama cat’s head, Bridey slid her fingers beneath the smallest and dragged it away. Mama twitched, then turned to lick her nursing brood.

Covered in hay and dust, Bridey backed toward the ladder. “We’ll need to find a way to feed the small one. It needs to stay warm too. We’ll have to go back inside.”

Edward scurried down as if he’d climbed ladders all his life. “Can we keep him?”

“I don’t know,” Bridey said honestly. “It is very weak. It may not live. And it may not be big enough to travel when you leave.”

At the bottom of the ladder, she let him see the poor creature shaking in her palms. He touched a little finger to a tiny forehead. “He is very sick,” he said solemnly.

Pascoe would raise unholy hell when he realized his children were illogical, unscientific, totally undiplomatic Malcolms.

She grinned. She couldn’t wait to be the one to tell him.

CHAPTER 16

SOMETIMES, diplomacy worked. Sometimes, a big stick was better. Pascoe wished for a big stick. He shifted his healing shoulder inside his tailored coat to hide his growing irritation. "You need a steward," he said bluntly.

He'd spent the past hour in Carlisle's study, talking to the young earl. All he'd succeeded in doing was ingesting too much expensive brandy and wasting too many cigars on a lad who didn't know how to savor them.

"Oscar is my steward," Carlisle said petulantly. "I trust him more than the queer fish who live here. The last applicant for bookkeeper tried to tell him chickens can count."

"Pigeon," Pascoe said, puffing his cigar. "But bird-wits can't manage men. Your furnace is gone and your mine is shut down. You need a good steward who can do more than keep books or you'll be bankrupt in a year."

"Oscar will do away with the troublemakers now that the witch isn't encouraging ghosts to support their mutiny." Carlisle dismissed the topic with a wave. "Oscar tells me that if His Majesty will send troops, we can have the mine in operation by next week. Surely miners shooting at him is sufficient reason to call in an army."

"His Majesty *won't* send troops until he knows the mine is managed properly. Darrow has no experience in management. Agree to someone His Majesty approves, and you'll see action."

Carlisle slammed down his empty snifter and snuffed his cigar in the dregs at the bottom. "I am not a child to be handled. Everyone thinks they can run my estate better than I can, and they're wrong."

"Busy men hire help. You were not raised to run an estate of this size—"

The banshee wailed. A loud thud and shattering of glass over their heads indicated another frame had fallen, apparently on a glass lamp or vase.

"Lady Carstairs is not here to cause that," Pascoe pointed out, using his cigar for emphasis.

"I have the servants looking for leaky chimneys." Carlisle wore his best obdurate look.

"Perhaps you should ask the lady if she knows how to stop it," Pascoe suggested evilly. "Did it only start after you moved in?"

"It's not my fault!" the young earl shouted. "If you're the only help His Majesty can send, then go back and tell him we'll do it ourselves. I don't need a bedeviled woman to tell me what to do."

He needed a woman to paddle his baby bottom. Tired of the discussion, Pascoe stood up. "I'll be honest with you. I'm generally not so blunt, but you seem unable to comprehend the danger you and your brother are in, and I can do no less for the king than to try to save his godsons from themselves."

Carlisle leaned back in his desk chair, crossed his arms, and glared. "State your point, then get the hell out."

Pascoe hadn't wasted his limited time when he'd talked to the villagers. He'd learned quite a bit about the earldom. Fin, in particular, had been edifying, once he'd been cornered. Fin had lived with Bridey off and on through his school years and knew the manor and its inhabitants as well as anyone. Pascoe dropped the book of knowledge on his petulant host.

"Your uncle developed the mines and foundry," Pascoe said coldly. "They have never been entailed. Only the manor and title are yours for life. I have seen the mine's books. Your brother has either given them to a thief to keep, or he is misplacing your funds. At the rate the mines are bleeding cash, within three years, you will not have the wherewithal to pay the mortgages or put food on the table. If you will not replace Darrow, then you may as well marry your heiress, move in with her, and leave all this to rot. I will *not* recommend that His Majesty send troops to protect the outcome."

Pascoe strode toward the door. The desk chair hit the floor hard behind him.

"Oscar would not steal from me!"

The banshee's wail almost sounded like a laugh. Pascoe couldn't answer any better than that. He walked out.

There went any chance of earning a knighthood from this project.

He usually finessed his subjects better, but this time, he'd lost patience. He had a lovely woman and his vulnerable children waiting for him. Carstairs had been handed everything Pascoe had been denied—and the brat was making mincemeat of it. Why should he give up his time for a beetle brain?

Which was the conclusion Bridey must have reached.

He'd tell His Majesty to have the government offer to buy the mines. Or to wait two years and buy the mortgage.

Unfortunately, the village would suffer badly until then, and Fin would either leave or get himself killed. Bridey and her brother might think they were hiding Fin's involvement in industrial sabotage, but Pascoe knew how to read people and ask the right questions. Fin was the only leader the villagers had. Without his cooperation, the foundry

would never be rebuilt—not the solution Pascoe sought. And now that it had come to gunfire. . . Carstairs could read the Riot Act—if he'd ever heard of it—and condemn the entire village to death the next time they protested.

Pascoe called for his horse and waited in the foyer. If he left now, he might be back in Wystan before nightfall. He ought to confront the lady with her brother's perfidy. Instead, he was imagining another pleasurable night in her bed before he had to return to London and make a report the king didn't want to hear.

A crash down the corridor, followed by a shriek of agony, had him swinging around and running back into the house.

Guests poured from the salon in front and the billiard room in back. Knowing he'd left Carstairs in the study in between, Pascoe dashed past heiresses, chaperones, and spongers.

The earl lay sprawled, unconscious, across the marble corridor, a battleax lying beside his bleeding head.

On the far end of the corridor, Oscar rushed out of the estate office. At seeing Pascoe, he shouted, "You! You were just with him. Arrest that man!"

Feeling a hundred years old, Pascoe snorted, lifted his monocle to his eye, and swung his stick with an air of nonchalant defiance. "Don't be an arse. You are closer than I was. Barker there was just picking up the study and even closer. And those two young gallants were just on the other side of the wall cheating each other at billiards. And who will do the arresting when the magistrate is out cold?"

The pretty heiress fell to her knees, weeping, beside the bleeding body. "Is he dead? Can you not call a physician? Help him!"

"Lady Carstairs no longer resides in the village," Barker the Butler intoned. "We must send to Edinburgh."

"For the love of all that's holy, have Lady Carstairs' family send a pigeon to fetch her! The lady can be here before any rider reaches Edinburgh. Someone fetch bandages, hot water, whiskey, and good strong lye soap." Pascoe added the last remembering Bridey's penchant for cleanliness.

Bridey. He definitely wasn't calling her Carstairs anymore, because it was apparent anyone of that title was an endangered species.



"MESSAGE FROM PASCOE," Lord Theo said ominously, entering the salon where Bridey sat with Celeste, the napping infant, and the tiny mewling kitten she was trying to feed. Lady Aster was sleeping while she had the chance.

Lord Theo looked grim. Frightened, Bridey's first question emerged without thought. "Is he all right?"

"This time, they've tried to murder the earl," Theo said in disgust. "Pascoe wants you to come help the bratling. You don't have to, you know. Pascoe can't command you as he does others."

The king's messenger did have a habit of ordering people about, arranging them to his satisfaction, but Bridey respected that ability. Handing the kitten to a startled Theo, she took the message just to read Pascoe's words herself. She winced at his description of the wound.

"I fear it sounds serious. If Carstairs dies, Oscar Darrow inherits, and someone will have to kill him. That would be two deaths on my head." Not even debating what she did, she stood up.

"Carstairs is no longer your responsibility," Celeste reminded her in a gentle voice.

"But if I can save a life, it is my responsibility. That's how I was taught." She started from the room to pack her bags.

"It will be dark in an hour. You can't ride all that way in the dark," Theo protested.

In the nursery above, Emma cried out. The child had returned worn out but unharmed by her separation from her twin. Was she having a nightmare now, or had she been frightened by unseen spirits? Had her mother warned her about Pascoe? What *did* the children see and hear? As much as she'd like to learn, she couldn't linger to find out.

Apparently, retiring from Northbridge wasn't possible.

"Someone will need to watch the twins until Pascoe returns, and I mean sleep across their door." With that, she hurried to her chamber.

She hated leaving Aster and the premature infant. She hated leaving the twins even more. But she was a physician first, and she couldn't change, didn't want to change. Knowing that she followed in her grandfather's footsteps strengthened her determination.

By the time she'd packed her bags, a groom waited, apparently notified by Lord Theo. She took her old mare and the servant took the pony. They wouldn't be speedy, but they would arrive before any messenger reached the city. Perhaps if he lived, Carstairs would understand the need for a physician in the village. It wouldn't be she.

Pascoe met her midway between Wystan and Northbridge. Night had descended, but the moon was full and bright, when it wasn't covered by clouds. Bridey sent the groom home to his bed and rode on with an oddly silent Pascoe.

"He is still alive?" she asked.

"Unconscious, but alive. His skull is exceptionally thick and the ax was dull. Whoever hit him didn't have much strength."

“That lets out Oscar, does it not? That’s a shame. Couldn’t you trump up charges against him anyway?” She had a year of bitterness to vent. She didn’t think Pascoe would mind.

“If it comes down to believing me or his godson, which do you think the king will choose?” he asked dryly. “Besides, someone has been shooting at Oscar as well. He may be a brute and an idiot, but he hasn’t killed his brother over all these years, although the temptation had to be strong.”

He sounded tired. Neither of them had had much sleep. It was best not to argue when they were most vulnerable.

Bridey told him of her day with the twins instead, not worrying him with their oddities but noting they might need to spend more time apart. To this, he seemed to listen. She had promised herself to be honest, but sometimes, kindness won out.

It was almost midnight before they arrived, but the manor was well lit and guests murmured among themselves as Bridey and Pascoe entered.

Barker the butler stopped them at the stairs. “Mr. Darrow has ordered that you be kept away from his brother.”

Here was the rejection she’d feared earlier, but no longer. Picking up her skirt, Bridey was about to brush past when the banshee howled. She could almost swear the walls shook.

Everyone except Pascoe looked terrified. He pressed the latch on his swordstick, turning it into a deadly sharp blade. With the weapon, he gestured at the old servant. “I will personally string Darrow over the side of the staircase if he prevents the earl from receiving medical attention. By the power invested in me by His Majesty, I demand that you stand aside.”

The old man obediently stepped away as if the whole act had been rehearsed. Exhausted, Bridey fought a hysterical giggle.

No one else dared interfere as they rushed up the stairs.

“You made that up,” she whispered, leading him to the earl’s chamber.

He shrugged and returned the blade into hiding. “He just needed an excuse.”

“I’m not certain that hanging isn’t the better alternative,” she muttered outside the door of the master chamber.

Pascoe opened the door without comment. Inside, servants hung about helplessly, waiting for orders. Lady Belinda wept. A young man about Gilroy’s age accompanied her, along with a large personage who might be their mother. Bridey remembered Gilroy had said Belinda was sister of a friend. All three looked up in relief at Bridey’s entrance. At least they weren’t complete nodcocks.

“Head wounds are difficult,” she warned them. “Do not expect

miracles of me. I will try to prevent infection and swelling. Healing is up to God.”

She noticed self-centered Oscar wasn’t at his brother’s side when she entered the patient’s bedroom. She scanned the inhabitants, picked out the servants she didn’t know, and gestured for them to leave.

“I can trust the ones who remain,” she murmured to Pascoe.

He nodded, and using his size and authority, ushered out those she’d told to leave. Then he blocked the door to prevent any unexpected interruptions.

Unwrapping the young earl’s head, Bridey winced at the size of the gash and the amount of swelling. At least they’d had the sense to bandage the wound. “I cannot sew it in this state. We’ll need to shave the hair around the wound, clean it, apply a fresh bandage and ice.” She glanced up at one of the footmen. “We still have ice?” The man nodded and darted off to fetch it.

“Has he regained consciousness at all?” she asked his valet.

The loyal servant turned a fearful gaze to study the other occupants. Apparently reassured, he whispered as if the walls could hear. “He did once, but Mr. Darrow insisted we give him laudanum until help arrived.”

“That’s the *worst* he could have done for a head wound! Hide the laudanum. Tell him it’s all gone. Don’t, under *any* circumstances, give his lordship more. I’ll give you headache powders that won’t completely help, but won’t kill him either.”

She had the valet shave around the wound, then she cleaned it. Her grandfather had taught her to mix alcohol with a tincture of iodine, a new chemical he’d been experimenting with, to coat wounds. She preferred herbs but with a wound like this, she would try anything.

“There is little else I can do,” she said wearily after applying a fresh bandage and the ice to reduce swelling. “He needs to regain consciousness before we can judge the extent of damage. Give thanks that his skull is not broken.”

“Do we need a list of servants who can be trusted with him?” Pascoe murmured for her ears alone, taking her arm to guide her back to the earl’s private parlor.

The banshee had quieted. Bridey thought she needed a word with her devil-ridden brother, but she was too tired to hunt him down tonight. “Barker knows whom to trust,” she whispered to Pascoe.

Then she turned to the red-eyed ladies and Carstairs’ friend. “I cannot tell if it is the laudanum or the injury keeping him unconscious, but the wound looks normal. The bleeding has almost stopped, which is a good sign. Head wounds can be messier than they

are serious. If you will keep someone with him to let me know when he wakes, we should all try to rest.”

The maternal lady nodded and led her weeping daughter away. The son insisted on staying to act as guard. Amazed that anyone could feel so much for the spoiled earl, Bridey felt guilty at her own callousness.

“I am not a good person,” she told Pascoe as they left the suite. “I am arrogant and judgmental.”

“And usually right, although people don’t appreciate that,” he said with dry humor. “Are we staying here tonight? Because if we are, I’m not leaving your side in this den of stupidity.”

She felt as if the weight of the world fell on her shoulders. “I hate this place, but I need to stay.” Then fully realizing what he’d said, she shot him a warning look. “We cannot share a bed. I’ll show you to a spare guest chamber.”

“I’ve already asked the housekeeper for a room.”

Since they’d disbursed the servants on different tasks, there was no one about to notice as he wrapped his arm around her waist and led her down an unlit corridor. Recognizing the direction, Bridey quit objecting. This wing was normally unused. She should protest, she knew, but even she wasn’t impervious to temptation. She needed his company tonight, and they’d be safer together.

A fire burned and hot water waited.

“Simple, yes?” he asked, dropping her valise and wrapping her against his solidity.

“They banished you to the wing that has never been renovated. It stinks of mold.” She snuggled against him for just this moment, inhaling his intoxicatingly masculine scent and drawing strength from him.

“The advantage being that there is no one about to see us come and go. I’ve been in far worse places. Privacy is preferable to fresh wallpaper.” He kissed the top of her head. “Thank you for coming. Not many women would have, and I really don’t wish to tell His Majesty his favorite godson died on my watch.”

“He may yet,” she warned, pushing away. “If there is swelling inside his skull, there is nothing I can do. I am no surgeon. You may wish to write Sommersville for advice.”

She wasn’t about to call for a gossiping maid. She turned her back so Pascoe could unfasten her. She ought to be ashamed of her wanton behavior, but she’d learned about human bodies from an early age and saw nothing shameful in exposing them.

“We’ll wait until morning and see how the earl fares before disturbing the duke.” He unhooked her bodice and began on her corset.

Pascoe's caress of her bare arms warmed her all the way through. "We'll need rest," she warned, stepping away before she wanted more.

"Unfortunately, I agree with you." He removed his hands from her to work on his neckcloth. "Maybe in the morning. . ." He lifted one thick eyebrow in an expression both questioning and leering.

Which sent another irrational thrill through her. "We'll see," she said, before escaping behind the screen with her bag.

Simply *sleeping* on the same bed with this tempting man didn't seem likely, but she feared their rest would be short-lived. If nothing else, the ghosts would see to that.

CHAPTER 17

IN THE HOURS just after dawn, the banshee commenced howling and someone began pounding on the door. Lying contentedly with warm, rounded woman in his arms and surrounded by her heavenly scent of gardenias and female, Pascoe growled at the intrusion. Bridey needed to sleep a few more hours, and he needed. . . What he didn't have the right to claim.

Still too exhausted to do more than dream of molesting his companion, Pascoe swung his legs, and his arousal, out of bed, cursing his ill fortune at having a willing woman and no time for her—the story of his life.

With years of experience at being dragged out of bed, he stuck his head around the door. The servant frantically asked if he knew where the countess was. Telling them he'd find her, he locked the door again.

By this time, Bridey was alert. She eyed his nakedness with interest, which didn't help matters any.

"You owe me a night of unbridled lust," he told her grumpily, dragging on drawers.

She wiped at her half-closed eyes. "Our patient will have developed a fever, hence the urgency. You could go back to bed. I can order ice and mix salve without you." Apparently awake enough now to throw up her shields, she reminded him of his place. "I don't need a man at my side all day."

Pascoe refrained from flinging a pillow at her stubborn head. "You would give the ghost a chance to put an ax in *your* head? I don't think so." Instead of crossing the battle-line she was drawing, he turned the topic in his own direction. "Out of curiosity, who is the next heir if Carstairs dies and I shove Darrow over a railing?"

Pascoe watched in regret as, wearing a voluminous nightgown, Bridey left the bed to gather fresh clothing from her bag. Even covered in billowing folds of linen, she was Venus personified. She'd braided all that glorious auburn into one waist-length rope that was already coming loose and spreading down her back. He desperately wished to loosen it for her, to brush out the silk, to smooth it over. . .

Deep breath, pull on trousers.

She reached for a gown thrown over the dressing screen. "The title is relatively new. George's grandfather and father were only sons.

His father had the three boys. The middle son died about a decade ago, leaving a couple of daughters in Edinburgh but no male issue. I think that's why George decided to marry again."

Pascoe watched her nightgown drop onto the screen and practically salivated imagining her standing nude on the other side. "He still had his nephews."

"George was estranged from his youngest brother, Henry, their father. He despised his sister-in-law, so I never met them. Henry died only a few months before George. At the time, George said that his nephews are the last of a bad line. I assume the estate reverts to the king if they should both expire before their time."

Pascoe almost laughed aloud at her phrasing. "Perhaps I can save my neck by suggesting to Uncle Willie that the kingdom would fare far better without his godsons. Kings must be pragmatic."

"It's a pity the Darrows can only be convicted by their peers," she said from behind the screen. "If we held a trial here, the village would most likely hang them. And possibly me," she added.

"Human nature lacks understanding, and in mobs, they are little better than apes," he said, dressing hurriedly so she did not have reason to sail off down the corridor without him.

Lily had been as bold as Bridey, courageous and impatient as well. And he'd *lost* her. Admittedly, he could not have prevented the disease that ultimately claimed her, but if he'd been able to keep her home. . . He couldn't, not when he was gone most of the time. The reminder kept him firmly on the narrow path he'd set himself. When it came time to choose a wife, it would be some maternal sort who *liked* staying home.

In the meantime, he would enjoy the company of a woman he admired and desired—and protect the obstinate wench from harm.

"A cynical attitude for a diplomat," she called from behind the screen, not reading his mind but responding to his earlier suggestion that people were apes. "I don't suppose while you are busy keeping Oscar from shoving me out windows, you might find some way of summoning my brother? I need a word with him."

"I rather thought I'd find him hiding in some chimney." Pascoe tugged his neckcloth into place as best as he could using the reflection in the tarnished wall mirror. He winced at his image. He needed a shave or three.

Bridey emerged from the dressing screen. Holding up her braid, she presented him with the gaping back of her bodice and corset. "Figured that out, did you?"

"He lived here with you growing up, did he not? Boys explore and there is nothing they like better than mischief. And your brother has a mechanical mind." Pascoe bit back a surge of desire and still could not

resist kissing her uncovered shoulder before he began the annoyance of fastening her into all her contraptions. She had skin like creamy silk, and he hated covering her up.

“Fin disliked George.” She turned her head to give his bristly chin a quick kiss of appreciation, but even that didn’t distract her from her purpose. “Fin wasn’t here much, but when he was, he spent it hiding out. I remember the banshee wail from his younger years. Fin only tried it twice before I boxed his ears and set him to scrubbing stables. I have no idea of the mechanism, but I am quite certain the spirits in this place haven’t the ability to wail.”

“Do they have the ability to fling axes?” He didn’t have to tug the bodice much to close it. It hung loose on her. Given that these older clothes were a dull gray, he realized the colorful outfits she wore at Wytan must be a brash statement of independence.

“Not that I’ve known.” Stepping away, she borrowed the sorry mirror to pin her braid up. “And Fin wouldn’t do anything to harm anyone. So the falling frames aren’t his doing either.”

“They do seem rather badly hung. I should think an engineer would attach them in such a manner that they’d remain standing if the wall fell, so I tend to agree. I don’t think the ax fell from the sky, though.”

“No, that’s a puzzlement. It does not seem to have been embedded very far, although the swelling prevents me from examining too closely.” She picked up her medical bag and opened the door on her own.

“The ax basically bounced off his skull.” Pascoe hurried after her, still buttoning his waistcoat. “It was dull enough that the villain might have done more damage if he’d used a mace.”

“Which Carstairs has also hung on the walls, I’ve noticed,” she said with scorn. “His idea of decoration is. . . medieval.”

“Definitely the ghosts objecting to them then,” Pascoe said in amusement.

“Spirits,” she corrected, slowing down before they reached the master chamber.

She gripped his arm, tilted her head, and intently studied the corridor with an odd look in her eyes. “There are none lingering here. Let me try something.”

She was looking for *spirits*?

She knocked at the suite door and nodded at the servant who opened it, but she did not seem to be focused on her surroundings. Pascoe had to hold her arm to guide her into the bedchamber. Her eyes appeared to be lit with an emerald fire, which caused him an eerie discomfort.

The exhausted valet looked up from attending the tossing patient.

Instead of studying the fevered earl or greeting the servant, the countess scanned the room, then the footmen standing guard. Only then did she look at Carstairs.

"The wound is not putrid," she announced, without having even looked at it. Finally seeming to return to this world, she crossed to the bed and began unwrapping the bandage. "Bring more ice and another pillow, please. If we can bring down the fever, he should wake." She addressed the valet. "Get some sleep. I'll stay with him until he is conscious."

At which point, young Carstairs would shout bloody murder and throw her out, Pascoe assumed. Yet the countess continued looking after the ungrateful brat when she ought to strangle him. Had she been anyone else, he would have thought her capable of murdering the lord, but he was fully confident she would not. Her dedication to her medical calling was too strong.

Once the valet was gone and the footmen had been sent for ice and hot water, Bridey spoke in a low voice. "Carstairs' aura is steady. I see no dangerous spirits. If you could arrange to send the new servants up a few at a time with food and tea and anything you can dream up, I'd like to examine their auras."

She didn't even bother fixing him with her gaze to see if he'd object. She just assumed he'd follow her utterly irrational command. Amused, Pascoe watched her clean and examine the wound. "Their auras?"

"Don't play the fool now. Your aura includes a shade of blue indicating gifts you aren't aware of. Just because I recognize mine doesn't make them any less. If you won't help me, then call Barker."

He'd never been so thoroughly dismissed in all his life. Pascoe stared at her back in wonderment. Her sincerity was evident. He had no doubt that she respected him and his abilities. But *gifts*? He chose to play lackey rather than discuss Malcolm folly.

"I'll give Barker his instructions and miraculously find your brother. Anything else? My magic wand is at your disposal."

She cast him a glance over her shoulder. "You were the one who insisted on accompanying me. If you have better things to do, just send Barker up."

"I suppose I deserved that, but I will remind you that your eccentric independence is the reason people call you witch." He tugged the bell pull to summon a servant.

"Witch with a *b*," she said in amusement, apparently not affronted. "And that sort of spitefulness is why most women hide behind false modesty, flapping eyelashes, and sweet smiles while they command their households. I don't have the patience."

"I think the smiling façade is the basis of diplomacy," he said

dryly. "Except men boast, slap each other on the backs, and exchange insults instead of flapping our lashes."

She really looked at him this time, and a smile formed on her luscious lips. "I think you may have the right of it. I lack diplomacy. *You* have too much of it."

"I prefer to call it tact and skill with people." At a rap on the door, he let in a footman and proceeded to issue orders.



BRIDEY ADMIRERD Pascoe's *tact and skill* as he allowed in one servant at a time—to carry coal, fill a lamp, bring up their tea and toast, provide pens and paper, then fresh pen nibs and a writing desk. He not only did so without ruffling a feather, he was extremely creative in his demands. And he did all this without an ounce of understanding of why she asked it. His lack of belief in Malcolm gifts grated, but he at least didn't deliberately obstruct her.

Holding ice wrapped in thick toweling to the earl's head, Bridey mostly kept her mouth shut as she examined the auras of each person introduced to the chamber. She jotted down the names of any with murky colors, which was more than had been here when she had presided over the household. Without knowing much of the new servants, she couldn't conclude if they were unhappy over their positions, or simply other problems in their lives. Just knowing which ones lacked concern, harbored resentment, and hid guilt gave her a starting place.

"Here are the ones most likely to poison us in our sleep," she said by mid-morning, when the last servant traipsed out. "I cannot know if they have the ability to hang murderous frames or wield axes."

Pascoe regarded the list with doubt. "And you tell this how?"

"Not easily." There was no point in explaining to a non-believer. "The second list is people who can be trusted. It might be good to question them about the ones on the first list. Has Barker found my brother yet?"

"Since the banshee has ceased wailing, I've sent word to your house. Even engineers need sleep." Pascoe stared down at the man in the bed. "He looks pale. Darrow hasn't put in an appearance yet. You'd think he'd at least stop by to express concern or heave us out."

"Oscar Darrow does nothing that doesn't directly relate to him. He simply does not care enough. That he's not here is another point in his favor, actually." Bridey sat at a table near the bed, sipping her morning tea and willing the young earl to wake.

"Twisted logic, I like it." Pascoe had spent the last hours scribbling missives, sealing them, and sending them off with the

various servants he kept summoning. He set his desk aside now. "I vote we haul the young lord to the front lawn and douse him with cold water to see if he wakes."

As if in response to the threat, Carstairs tossed restlessly and muttered, "Belinda?"

"Ah, there we go. Shall I call for the young lovely?" Pascoe stood.

"I haven't examined her aura, but I assume she'll be thrilled. I'm also surprised Darrow hasn't found a way of chasing her off." Bridey returned to the bed to sponge her patient's face. His fever seemed to be abating.

"Point taken. I've sent a request to Edinburgh to examine the accuracy of the heiress's perceived wealth, and to learn more of the merry band of sloths she attracts. I haven't detected any ill-will among them, but it's best to have facts to corroborate instinct."

"Your *instinct* may be the gift your aura says you have. Interpreting what our instincts tell us takes skill and an open mind. After all that, we still cannot know when we're accurate. Rather makes our unusual gifts useless sometimes," she said, watching her patient.

"My instinct comes from years of experience. I'll take it over your gifts anytime." He left on his errands.

Carstairs continued muttering and tossing his head, growing still only when Bridey rubbed his face with a cool cloth.

Unfortunately, the earl chose to awake the instant Lady Belinda and her mother rushed into the room. The string of invectives he unleashed as he fought back Bridey and the cloth she was applying startled the ladies into retreat.

Bridey slapped him with a wet rag and walked away from the bed. She would have walked out entirely, except they needed to guard the lackwit until they knew what they were up against.

"Very, very poorly done, old rum," Pascoe scolded, having returned with the ladies. "I'll tell Lady Belinda you're hallucinating, shall I?"

Carlisle cursed some more and struggled to sit up. "Where the hell is Davis? My head pounds like the very devil. I need one of his concoctions."

"Your loyal valet has spent the night nursing that cracked skull," Bridey informed him without sympathy. "His hangover recipe won't help you this time. I would refrain from shouting, if I were you. You just terrified Lady Belinda."

"What the *devil* are you doing here?" He pressed his fingers against his eyes, presumably attempting to shut out pain. "What do you mean, cracked skull?"

The banshee started wailing. Bridey sent Pascoe a look of

exasperation.

He shrugged. "He didn't respond to my message. I have Barker hunting."

Carstairs peered from beneath one lid and glared at Bridey. "You're still here? What did you hit me with?"

"Hit him again," Pascoe suggested. "I like him better when he's unconscious."

"That's your diplomatic skill?" Bridey asked, hiding her laughter. "It leaves much to be desired."

"Just tell me what the devil happened!"

Bridey handed her patient his robe. "Put this on. Pretend you're civilized, and I will allow Lady Belinda to tell you, since you won't trust us."

He only looked a little ashamed as he dragged on the robe and attempted to run his hand over his hair. He winced when he encountered the bandage. His unshaven jaw wasn't as bad as Pascoe's thick bristle, Bridey concluded. They'd need to import a squadron of barbers before day's end though.

When Carstairs was remotely presentable, she gestured for Pascoe to allow the ladies in again. Bridey examined their auras as they approached, not expecting more than the usual boring pastels.

Both ladies sported a muddy dark green that could indicate jealousy or resentment or possibly blaming themselves or others for some indiscretion.

Well, hell, as her grandfather was inclined to say.

CHAPTER 18

“I NEED to return to Wystan,” the countess told Pascoe. Everyone had left the invalid alone in his chamber to be attended by his overworked valet. “I have no desire to become involved with these people. I’ll write the duke. He’s fascinated by head injuries. He might come, or send his son, at least.”

“The duke knows nothing of the situation and is likely to be thunked on the head too,” Pascoe said in irritation, pacing the earl’s private parlor. “I need to set guards on the doors but trusting *auras* isn’t sufficient knowledge.”

“Trust no one, then,” she said with a shrug. “Carstairs brought this on himself. Most of the village wants to murder him.”

Pascoe glared at her. “I know you’re not as cold as you pretend. Write the duke. I’ll include a note. The mines are of national importance. He’ll send someone.”

“I am not pretending,” she insisted. “I’ve thrown my life away on this place, and I receive hatred and fear in return. I need to check on the people in Wystan. They don’t call me names and scorn me.”

Pascoe gathered his considerable patience like a cloak around him to prevent flying off the handle. “You deserve better, beyond any doubt, and I sympathize. But sometimes, one must endure for the good of all. It’s not as if I enjoy babysitting a whining, petulant brat.”

“But it’s your *duty*,” she pointed out spitefully. “It’s not mine any longer.”

She swept out. Pascoe wanted to gnash his teeth. He paced instead. She was right. The twins and the Malcolm ladies needed her. There was little she could do to help a ninny-hammer who refused her aid. So what it boiled down to was that *he* wanted her to be tender hearted and stay.

He enjoyed her company and her intelligence too much. Their verbal sparring excited him in a manner detrimental to his goals.

But she wasn’t the maternal sort he needed for the twins, he reminded himself, just the one he lusted after, which meant he needed to let her go, deuce take it.

The banshee wailed a particularly grating note. Losing his much vaunted patience, Pascoe slammed his walking stick against an innocent table leg and stomped into the corridor. He’d spent a lifetime in all-male environments. He knew how the minds of half-grown boys

worked. Fin Finley was smarter and older than most, but he was an angry, frustrated young man—

An angry young man with access to the attics and roof where no one else would ever go. Pascoe located the door for the upper story. Sticking to the edge of the stairs so they wouldn't creak, he slipped up them as quietly as he could. The upper floor was a warren of servants' rooms and dormitories—no nursery that he could see. He felt a moment of sympathy for the countess who so clearly loved babies, but he didn't have any more time for foolish sentiment than she did. He hunted for a door to the storage attic under the eaves. A manor like this always had one.

He located the painted panel and eased open the latch. It was extremely well-oiled for a door that shouldn't receive much use. No cobwebs marred his passage. The banshee had stopped its wailing. He wondered if there was another exit—in which case, he'd lost this battle but not the war, not yet.

At the top of the old stairs, he considered the three chimneys rising through the crowded, dusty open attic: one at each end and another in the middle. With wardrobes, stacked furniture, and endless piles of trunks about, hiding places were innumerable.

"I could place a guard here and let you starve," he called cheerfully. "Or you can come out and tell me what the devil you think you'll accomplish. It's not as if I care if you waste your time up here, but the noise is annoying the ladies."

He heard a scrape and a rattle near the middle chimney. Swinging his stick, he waited.

Eventually, a young boy crept out from beneath a table, not Fin Finley. Uncut hair, no beard yet, filthy tatters, but a familiar mulish expression on his square jaw that had Pascoe wondering about his parentage.

"I'm not hurting anyone," the boy declared boldly—and without the uneducated accent his clothes might lead a listener to expect.

"Just annoying the devil out of them, but that's the intent, I take it. Tell Fin he's driving off his sister as well, and that's a really bad plan. Let's make a deal."

The boy was intelligent enough to listen.



BRIDEY HAD her bags packed and a note to the Duke of Sommersville ready to be sealed when Pascoe finally put in an appearance. He'd found time to shave and don freshly laundered linen. He looked a proper diplomat as he handed over the folded missive he wished her to send to the duke.

“Carstairs has agreed to frank this, and his lady-love has persuaded him that an exorcism might be beneficial. We need you to help with the affair,” Pascoe said with the confidence of one accustomed to expecting people to jump at insane orders.

He could look as tempting as Adonis and command all he wished. The only thing likely to persuade her to stay was another night in his bed. But Pascoe had donned his officious diplomatic behavior like a suit of armor. She waited for him to stick the blamed monocle in his eye to intimidate her into agreeing.

She glared at his act. “*Spectacle*, you mean. I have no desire to participate in whatever charade you’ve dreamed up, because I know full well you don’t believe in spirits. And I can’t believe the vicar would agree to an *exorcism*! That’s pure twaddle.”

She took the note he offered, and without reading it, enclosed it with her own, folding the paper and dripping sealing wax on it. She pressed it with the ring George had given her. Despite all appearances to the contrary, she was still a countess and entitled to the crest.

“You are absolutely no fun at all,” he complained. “I might as well be at home, arguing with my much-too-logical nephews. Did you never play games as a child? Was it all study and seriousness?”

She stared at him in disbelief. “An exorcism is fun?” But his needling had touched a sore point. She couldn’t remember a time when she’d played just for fun—well, except for her night with Pascoe, and that was more about lust than lighthearted nonsense.

“If you don’t take yourself too seriously, it will be,” he said, suddenly grinning, making her pulse race in ways it shouldn’t. “I promise. And we don’t need the vicar. We have you.”

“You don’t have me,” she said in irritation. “I’d like to return to Wystan in daylight.”

His smile slipped away, and he poured all the power of those deep blue, heavily-lashed eyes on her. “I would appreciate your help, please. The duke is unlikely to arrive for several days. Theo knows how to send a message if they need you at Wystan. The kingdom and I need you more than they do.”

The man was too damned compelling. Bridey fought an internal struggle that she dare not let him see or the wretched man would twist it to his own devices. His twins called to her far more than the idiot earl and mechanical ghosts. But they were not hers to care for any more than Carstairs. She belonged in neither place.

With a sigh, she hesitated. “What is your plan and its purpose?”

“The banshee has consented to quit wailing if you’ll perform the exorcism. My plan is to ingratiate you with Carstairs and his guests by stopping that infernal screeching. Once the earl has a voice of reason directing him, I hope to visit the mining operation and talk to the

miners.” He leaned over and pressed a kiss to her forehead. “Lots of holy Latin,” he whispered.

His kiss almost made the silliness worth it. No one had ever taken the time to caress or cajole her as if she were important and special. The man would grow on her if she was not careful. “How many of them do you think know Latin?” she asked, trying to sound disagreeable.

“None,” he said. “Carstairs does not attract the best and brightest. But so far, his guests seem harmless enough, and his lady knows her way around a household, which is all he needs.”

“If he hires stewards who know what they’re doing, you mean. That’s unlikely, since as you say, he does not attract the best and brightest. And if he did, Darrow would drive them off. Where is the heir, by the way?” She stood up, and Pascoe immediately grasped her waist and covered her face in kisses.

She gasped, but she did not fight him. If she was to star in his charade, he owed her kisses. She held her palm to his newly-shaven cheek, caught his mouth with hers, and savored his heated response. Her heart had longed for this for so long—

A knock interrupted, of course. With a sigh, she stepped away and picked up the letter. Pascoe brushed a tendril behind her ear but distanced himself as the footman she’d called took the missive and ran off on his errand.

“Another night,” he murmured once they were alone again. “Give me one more night.”

She didn’t dare look at him. “When do you mean to host this charade?”

“The ghost is consulting with his puppet master. Your brother has hidden himself well. I’m hoping this will draw him out too. When the wail increases in intensity, I’ll start gathering the guests.” He stroked her arm through the layer of billowing silk. “I don’t mean to use you like this, and I apologize.”

She gave a half-laugh. “It’s your nature to use any tool available. I, of all people, understand that. It’s how one gets things done.” Taking a deep breath, she finally faced him again, studying the sincerity in his expression. She didn’t need to see his aura to know he meant every word he said. “It isn’t Fin creating the racket?”

“Oh, I’m sure he set up the mechanism.” Pascoe smiled deprecatingly. “It’s just he apparently has better things to do with his time and has left a minion in charge. Do you know a boy, maybe ten or eleven, who is well spoken but dresses in rags? He wouldn’t give his name but he smelled trustworthy.”

Smelled trustworthy? *Seemed* trustworthy, he must have said. Bridey frowned and shook her head. “I know the village children. I

can't think of one I'd exactly call well-spoken. That requires an education that's hard to come by. I persuaded George to hire a teacher for the last few years, but an eleven-year old. . ."

"Perhaps Fin will enlighten us, once we find him. We'll have to hope he follows through on his minion's promise. In the meantime, I need to quiz the servants about that battleax. I don't suppose Carstairs has a mother who might stir herself to nurse her son?" Pascoe stopped at the door to turn and ask the last.

"She lives in London. George despised her, but from what he said, I don't believe she's the maternal sort. Carstairs sends her a stipend. She sends demanding notes to cover gambling debts. We could bring her here and shove her out a window with Darrow."

"You really need a turret to lock them in." He saluted and stalked off, apparently in pursuit of ghosts and battleaxes.

Bridey held a hand to the lips he'd seared with his hunger and wondered what had happened to the determined woman she'd been just last week.



RAIN FORCED the house party to stay inside, Pascoe noted with approval. At Bridey's orders, the servants had laid out a buffet the guests might enjoy as they played at billiards, cards, or in the case of the ladies, sewed and conversed. Food always brought people together—a much simpler suggestion than his plan to gather them by himself.

Pascoe paced the halls, examining the walls and the newly-acquired medieval weapons, while making discreet inquiries of the servants according to the lists Bridey had given him. He trusted her *gift* the way he trusted his own instincts. Women simply looked at the world differently.

Staying here as a respectable gentleman, he'd had to ask the housekeeper's permission to question the maids instead of going in by the kitchen door. That hadn't gone well. They'd been far too intimidated to answer honestly.

His missions usually demanded sitting in taverns or backrooms, talking to his hosts and various nobles, and learning the lay of the land. Women lacked the position and power to affect matters of national importance, so he'd seldom questioned any, except to verify a few facts here and there with servants.

He may have given the fairer sex less credit than they deserved, he reflected, as he watched a maid dusting the sword collection. That's what happened growing up in an all-male household. Bridey had opened his mind to the value of feminine insight.

The banshee began its wail again. He'd almost been afraid that

Fin would remove his minion and not agree to the deception. He'd counted on Bridey's brother wanting to help her, though.

Returning to the corridor, Pascoe leaned against the wall and waited for Bridey to emerge from the master chamber that had once been hers and now belonged to the petulant earl. She didn't seem sentimental about having to give up all this grandeur. He glanced around and re-evaluated that thought. The manor was elegant, displaying the wealth of its owners, but it was bland, unlike Bridey. Beneath her icy demeanor, Bridey was all color and fire.

He watched her emerge from the sickroom in a rustling, bright yellow gown, her rich auburn hair stacked in luxurious mounds that he'd enjoyed unpinning. She needed a house full of sunshine and music, he decided, quite arbitrarily, because he feared his existence would lack color and life when she was gone.

"Is Carstairs well guarded?" he asked, offering his arm.

"His valet is with him, the door is locked, and Forest is guarding the other side," she acknowledged, laying her slender hand on his coat sleeve. "Our banshee has reached a particularly unholy scale."

The wail shrieked at a pitch only a squealing pig blowing a bagpipe could achieve.

"One last blast of disharmony. Are you musical, by any chance?" He led her toward the stairs.

"I wouldn't know. Music was never part of my life, I fear." She didn't sound regretful.

"I think you would enjoy the symphony. And the theater. I want you to come to London someday, let me show you what the city has to offer." She would make a splendid mistress. He drank in her exotic scent of gardenias and wished he could pull her into an empty room and simply inhale her presence for a while.

"If the duke isn't interested in my proposal, then perhaps I shall visit London someday," she said, giving him hope she might acquiesce and causing a surge of jealousy at the same time.

"What proposal?" Sommersville was elderly and had been widowed for a decade, so Pascoe had no excuse for jealousy. Rainsford, the duke's heir, however, was unmarried, and also interested in medicine. Pascoe hated how that thought curdled his insides—because Rain was perfect for her.

"I have proposed a school to teach women about their anatomies and how to treat their ailments, as well as to treat their children when there is no physician available."

Pascoe tried not to let his eyebrows leap to his hairline. She said this as if such a school was a perfectly reasonable project and not a scandal that men would never allow. A chill sank into his bones. "A school of midwifery?" he suggested. "Has that not been banned?"

“Not yet,” she said grimly, revealing she understood the difficulty. “Although men will try. I will not call it that, however. I’m still thinking of names. But there’s absolutely no reason why women can’t learn what I do. Too many villages have no available physicians. Too many families can’t afford them. If women could just learn the basics of preventing infections. . . We could *save* lives.”

“Most male physicians don’t use your techniques. You will be preaching controversial and unstudied practices and going up against the licensing laws. They will tar and feather you,” he insisted, as the banshee wailed stridently overhead.

“My grandfather and I have studied the prevention of infection,” she said without concern. “I know what works, even if I don’t know why. If they don’t like what I teach, men can pretend we’re learning how to bathe babies. Let them laugh at our superstitious female eccentricity when we insist on clean aprons and hands and boiled utensils.”

They entered the main salon where the guests were gathering. Most were frowning at the ceiling since the banshee had yet to relent as it usually did.

Lady Belinda rushed up to them. Pascoe imagined Bridey had been this young and eager once. He could hope this ingénue would be half as good at managing the estate as Bridey had been.

“Do you think this portends anything ominous?” she asked anxiously. “Is Lord Carlisle in danger?”

“His lordship is grumpy and unreasonable as always,” Bridey assured her. “The swelling is going down as expected. There is a return of fever, so I have sent for advice as a precaution. But he has nothing to do with that unholy. . .” She gestured upwards at the howl. “Where is Darrow?”

Pascoe almost choked. He had not meant for the countess to pin the wail on the earl’s bully of a brother, but he admired the subtlety of her revenge.

Lady Belinda looked around, puzzled. “I have not seen him. I suppose he should be here, shouldn’t he? Perhaps he is carrying on estate business?”

One of the solicitous young men approached. “Last I saw, Darrow was in his office. He seems to be there or at the mine much of the day. I thought it was the miners shooting at him. Do you think the *ghost* means to harm him?”

“Or that he is *responsible* for the ghost,” Lady Belinda corrected, showing the young lady’s perspicacity. “Perhaps you should seek him out, if only to see if he is in danger, too?”

The young man signaled one of his companions and the two set out down the corridor.

The banshee's wails shrieked louder and higher, compelling several of the guests to cover their ears. Lady Belinda's mother hurried over. "We must leave if this madness continues. Is it possible to move Lord Carlisle? He cannot recover in this asylum."

"I would not recommend moving him until we know that there is no swelling inside his skull," Bridey said almost regretfully. "As I just told Lady Belinda, I have sent for advice. The duke of Sommersville is more conversant on head injuries than I am. And we can always hope the messenger will be returning from Edinburgh with a true physician."

A clamor of crashing metal ensued. Pascoe wanted to ascend to the attic and shove the miscreants up the chimney they were using, but he was the one who had told the boy to do his worst.

Fin Finley finally strolled in, wearing a good suit, starched neckcloth, and looking like the grandson of a viscount that he was. He strode up to Pascoe and shook his hand, then bowed to Lady Belinda and her mother.

"I will be happy to escort you back to the city at any time you wish to depart," he said to the heiress. "If even my holy sister cannot stop this lunacy, no one can."

Holy sister? That was a new twist.

Another of the young ladies had drifted up at Fin's entrance. Pascoe bit back a smile at the ways of young love, although the lad barely noticed her existence. It could be the effect of the particularly virulent green silk she was wearing.

But the lady proved she'd been listening. "Lady Carstairs can stop ghosts?" she inquired innocently.

Or perhaps not so innocently, since Fin finally looked at her with approval. "Carstairs claims my sister is the witch who called the ghost. I should think that would mean she could stop it, don't you?"

Bridey swatted the back of his head with her fan. "The ghosts did not inhabit the house while I lived here. I think Darrow brought them. Find Darrow, and I'll exorcise *him*."

Pascoe had a hard time biting back laughter. Several more young men and ladies had gathered around. Not wishing to give up their house party with free food and drink, they whispered among themselves. More went in search of the missing brother.

Pascoe was starting to fear what the *gifted* frost queen had in mind. With Malcolms, it could easily involve real ghosts.

CHAPTER 19

BRIDEY HAD DECIDED that if Pascoe wished to use her like a wrench to tighten loose screws, then she would accomplish her own purposes as well. His little charade gave her the opportunity to turn the tables on dastardly Darrow. If the earl's tyrant of a brother really thought she was a witch, working on his superstition should be amusing enough to almost make this scene worthwhile.

Fin shot her a reproving look for her smack to his head, but Bridey did not want their audience thinking they were working together. Which they weren't, actually. Her brother and Pascoe seemed to have connived in their own male manner, essentially leaving her out of their plot. She knew ultimately, they had to discredit Darrow in Carstairs' eyes, at least enough so Pascoe could look closer at the mine.

She hoped they had the banshee shut-off signal well planned because the unholy din was even scattering *her* wits. Having help was a new and interesting experience. She didn't know if she could learn to rely on others for anything truly serious, but in this case, it was essential. She couldn't bring the earl's brother down on her own—without planting a knife in his back.

Oscar Darrow finally strode in, looking rumpled and annoyed and accompanied by several of the guests. "What the devil is the meaning of all this caterwauling?" he grumbled. "I'm trying to work. And why are these two miscreants here? No wonder we can't have any peace." He glared at Bridey and Fin.

"We're here because I'm still the countess and have dower rights to the manor," Bridey told him grandly. "That I haven't sued for them is credit to my distaste for bullies and brats. And if you want your brother to heal, *you* need to stop this infernal cacophony at once."

She used her best imperious manner, drawing herself up straight and glaring down her nose. Since they were of a height, Darrow could only intimidate with his bulk, and she was surrounded by protectors bigger than he.

"*You* are the witch stirring the ghosts," he said with a dismissive gesture. "Leave, and we'll have peace."

That had been the final straw last time. It wouldn't work now that she knew others believed her.

"The ghost was wailing even before Lady Carstairs arrived," Lady

Belinda boldly declared before Bridey could say anything.

Bridey wanted to cheer the young lady for standing up to the brute who might become her brother-in-law. There was a little more beneath Belinda's blond curls than was otherwise visible.

The other guests moved in closer to hear the argument. They nodded agreement.

"Banshees are Irish, are they not?" Pascoe asked in his bored aristocratic drawl, barely concealing the wicked gleam in his eye.

Bridey sipped her sherry and let the superstitious and the intolerant display their ignorance as their audience exclaimed on Irish ghost stories and other flummery. In self-defense, she opened her inner eye to scan for stray spirits or troubled auras. She saw nothing particularly ominous in the muddled rainbows surrounding her. As expected, the more bigoted lived with heavier shades of gray. Those amused by the discussion sported lighter colors. Pascoe wore his usual intense reds. The man concentrated his entire attention on this foolish event. He needed to relax.

She took a cautious look around, finding the familiar pastel aura of a former countess hovering over the mantel. Bridey tried to send her soothing vibrations.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught a flash of confused red and dark green shooting back and forth from a shadowy corner of the ceiling to the paneling over the chimney. Alarmed, Bridey shut down her inner eye. *That spirit was new.*

Even with her aura vision obscured, she could feel the frantic soul. If she couldn't open her inner eye, that lessened her chances of making this experiment work. If she could placate the angry spirit—she tried to imagine which ancestor might have come to haunt Carstairs. It certainly wasn't placid George. She had no idea what the spirit wanted.

The wail and clangor reached a level that made it nearly impossible to hear herself think. How in the name of heaven could anything human create that racket? Shaken, Bridey decided it was time to bring this absurdity to its end.

She raised her voice. "Do Irish banshees not predict death? Is it possible that Mr. Darrow brought one with him when he hired the newcomers?"

Fin eyed her with interest. Her brother knew she didn't have a superstitious bone in her body, but she wasn't playing the game the way Pascoe had probably explained it to him—because neither logical man would understand what she needed to do.

"That's inane fol-de-rol!" Darrow blustered. "You are simply saying that because you don't like my hiring outside the lazy sots in the village."

A slow burn took root in her chest. Bridey narrowed her eyes. Pascoe stiffened as if a gauntlet had been thrown. Fin leaned against the mantel, thumping his hand against the stones. The wail transformed into a mournful, haunting howl that had Lady Belinda growing pale and sending anxious glances toward the stairs to the room of her beloved.

Oscar Darrow deserved whatever happened next.

Bridey shrugged and handed her glass to a servant. "Very well. Let's experiment. My leaving the house evidently did not improve the spirit's. . . spirit. Did your Irishmen bring a priest with them by any chance?"

"Of course not. I'll not have any of those papist heretics here." Darrow shot her an ugly look.

"Oh, by no means allow the poor fellows the benefit of their own church," she replied airily. "So, we cannot invite a priest to exorcise the ghost. Just in case this banshee means harm to Lord Carlisle, perhaps we could all pray that the ghost forsake Mr. Darrow and his Irishmen?"

Half the guests looked puzzled. Several frowned thoughtfully. Studying Bridey and Pascoe as if to read their intent, Lady Belinda reluctantly nodded. "Should we form a prayer circle around Mr. Darrow? We could each offer up our own prayer that the ghost depart?"

It seemed the lady had her own grudge against Darrow and was willing to make him a target. Well done. She wouldn't have to make this all her own idea. "Excellent notion! Darrow, stand right there, and we'll form around you. Let us drive off your malevolent spirit with good English prayer! Gentlemen, join us please."

She directed the circle so that it included Fin, even though he continued to lean insolently against the mantel.

Darrow glanced at the doorway as if prepared to flee. Pascoe planted himself in his path, taking the hands of two matrons and creating a formidable obstacle. The younger ladies tittered but joined in. The men refused to hold hands unless they'd been smart enough to grab one of the ladies, but Bridey wasn't much concerned about handholding. She simply wanted the pretend-ritual to direct any accusations away from herself.

Pascoe began a prayer in a sonorous chant. She was in awe that he'd even attended church long enough to memorize a prayer, although she supposed he might have learned one or two as a student. Recognizing the words, others tentatively joined in as if they were in church.

The banshee continued to howl mournfully, accompanied now by the solemn beat of a drum. Bridey really wanted to meet Fin's

ingenious *minion*. Darrow looked prepared to bolt, but with a little subtle pressure of the hands, the group closed tighter around him.

When the cacophony continued unabated, the prayer faltered. Darrow looked even more belligerent and the guests glanced at each other nervously, no doubt feeling foolish and looking for an excuse to quit. What the deuce was Fin waiting for?

Remembering an earlier conversation, Bridey grabbed Lady Belinda's hand. "Wait a minute. Catholics speak Latin in their services, don't they? Perhaps we're using the wrong language!"

She didn't dare look at Pascoe for fear he'd burst out laughing. *He* hadn't seen a malevolent spirit hovering. She wasn't certain this was a laughing matter any longer. What if Fin's minion was one of the angry laborers and really meant harm? Alarm coursed through her at the possibility of Carlisle's attacker hiding in the attic.

She focused on Darrow. There was enough fear in his expression that she assumed his superstition was winning over his usual blustering fury.

"Does anyone know Latin?" Bridey asked with all the sweetness of Lady Belinda and her mindless cohorts.

"Of course. Learned it at school. How about you, Darrow?" Pascoe asked with an edge of maliciousness.

"Papist flummery," Darrow muttered. "This is going nowhere. I need to return to work."

"One more try," Bridey insisted, hiding her unease. She began reciting the Lord's Prayer in her schoolgirl Latin.

Pascoe joined in, as did Fin, surprisingly. One or two of the other gentlemen stumbled along a beat or two later. They almost produced a solemn monk's chant. The chant grew louder with excitement as the clangor began to fade and the wail diminished.

Bridey really needed to understand Darrow's reaction. He was frozen in the center of the circle, not saying a word, pretending nonchalance but hiding something. Could he truly believe he had invited demon spirits? If he was guilty of ordering his own brother hurt. . . she needed to know it. But if the malevolent spirit lingered, she didn't dare open her inner eye and invite possession.

Since the Lord's Prayer was the only one she knew in Latin, Bridey repeated it. More voices joined in.

If she was meant to try her gift, she needed to do so now. What was the point of having a gift she couldn't use? Feeling protected by the hands holding hers and the prayer filling the air, she focused on Darrow, opened her inner eye, and. . .

Screamed.



HORRIFIED, Pascoe dropped the sweaty hands of two matrons and dashed to Bridey's side. She was swaying badly enough to topple, and her cheeks had paled to ghostly. He tried to catch what she muttered while Fin shouted at everyone to keep their hands together and continue praying. Pascoe took Bridey's hand, and she seemed to steady. He prayed this was a performance.

He had a horrid feeling that it was not.

"*Traitor*," she shouted. "Thief! Usurper!"

Usurper? What the deuce was she accusing Darrow of? And why?

Darrow seemed to wilt inside himself, looking stunned. He stepped backward, away from Bridey.

"The demon has left Darrow and is possessing my sister," Fin cried desperately, sounding sincere and not like he was playacting. He grabbed Bridey's free hand. "Keep praying!"

What the deuce did her brother know that he didn't? Pascoe would shake the truth out of both of them later. Responding to Fin's panic, Pascoe squeezed Bridey's right hand, and raised his voice in the Latin prayer. The others followed, with even some of the women hesitantly picking up a few words—

Because the prayer was *working*. Bridey stopped swaying and muttering. She clasped his hand tighter and returned to repeating the prayer. More voices rose in excitement.

And the banshee wail faded into nothingness.

A loud pop followed the end of the fourth repetition of the prayer. Silence ensued.

Bridey nearly collapsed into Pascoe's arms. As if that was the signal to rejoice, the guests cheered and hugged each other. Fin crossed his arms and tried not to look smug. Darrow had turned a paler shade of gray and seemed unable to move.

Pascoe wanted to tell them all to go to hell so he could carry Bridey out of this snake pit. But he needed to redirect attention to his target before people began wondering about the countess again. He let Bridey lean on his arm while he reached over to whack Darrow on his shoulder, nearly toppling the stunned steward on his face. "Irish, old man. The ghost was definitely Irish and attached to you. How do you feel now that the lady has imperiled her own soul to exorcise you?"

And because he was too superstitious and stupid to summon any argument to Pascoe's authoritative declaration, the bully merely glared, and shoulders bent, stomped from the room—leaving Bridey heroine of the hour as silence blessed the room.

"We need to talk," Pascoe whispered in her ear with enough threat to prevent her protest as he dragged her from the salon.



PASCOE DROPPED her into a chair in the library, shut the door, and headed for the brandy decanter. Bridey objected as he handed her a snifter, but too shaken to argue, she sipped and let the alcohol burn all the way down. It wasn't much of a restorative.

"What just happened out there?" he demanded, dragging a wing chair across from her. "This was supposed to be a comic farce, not a dramatic presentation that nearly stopped my heart!"

"Why ask when you won't believe me?" Not that she believed herself either. But it had happened before. She closed her eyes, as if that would shut out the experience.

Emanating too much masculine energy for her weakened state, Pascoe muttered an obscenity and took a deep drink of his brandy. Before she was aware of his intention, he set his glass aside, lifted her from the chair, sat down, and dragged her into his lap.

Being enveloped in his very human strength and warmth felt so good, she cradled the brandy snifter and leaned against his shoulder. The linen of his neckcloth cushioned her cheek. His strong arms embraced her, and she felt safe. No spirit would dare attack her when this man was there to shield her. Foolish notion, but she needed the reassurance right now.

"I like the way you smell," she murmured, keeping her eyes closed and just enjoying this brief moment when she felt protected as she hadn't since she'd been a small child.

"I usually love your scent of gardenias, but they smell blighted right now," he answered with coldness. "Let me decide what I want to believe."

"Blighted?" She smacked his broad shoulder but didn't lift her head. "I don't wear perfumes. They make some people sneeze."

"Don't distract me with argument. You shouted in a voice that wasn't your own. What happened?"

She sighed and sipped the brandy. Layers of skirt and petticoat came between them, but she could still feel his hard thighs beneath hers, and the memory of the night in his bed provided the courage to share what she could not with anyone else.

"If I open my inner eye to see auras, I open myself to spirits," she said, then waited for him to laugh, argue, or drop her in disgust.

"You must explain as if I'm an infant," he insisted. "I do not even understand what 'spirit' means in the sense of the word I assume you're using."

"I can't say that I do either. I just know I see colors that reflect people who have passed on from the earthly plane. First, you need to understand auras."

"I have time. Talk." He relaxed a fraction, enough to rub a reassuring hand down her spine.

At least he wasn't laughing at her or calling her witch. Talking was almost all she could do at the moment. She felt boneless. "Understand that much of what I say, I have gathered from family journals," she warned. "Without those histories, I would be utterly lost. Never laugh at our Malcolm library, please. It prevents us from making the same mistakes over and over."

"History, I understand. I read political history to learn how government and people work. I would never laugh at your journals. Reading is what separates us from the apes."

She felt the warmth of the brandy spreading. "Auras are the colors of our spirits, our souls, our personalities, the life force of who we are, take your choice of terms. Over the years, we have compiled lists describing personalities related to these colors, although it's not all personality. Sometimes, we can see illness, for instance."

"See me confused, but continue."

She inhaled the male scent of his neck and kissed his bristled jaw for his attempt at understanding. "You are a particularly intense set of reds that no doubt means you are exceptionally grounded in the real world and a survivor at any cost. You are energetic and competitive and have an extremely strong sense of self. You have a few darker bands, shades of blue that might indicate good intuition or some type of clairvoyance. All of this comes together *because* of who you are and *makes* you what you are, if that makes sense."

"Infinity, chicken and egg, that sort of thing. I am strong, therefore I react strongly. Because of who I am, I cannot behave differently."

"Yes, thank you, that comes close, although everyone is capable of change, so even that's not complete. Having so much of one color is good in some ways, bad in others. You really need to broaden your spectrum." She said that with a hint of amusement. Weariness was overtaking her.

"Talking of me is not explaining *usurper*," he reminded her.

"Is that what I said? It tends to be hazy, rather like having an epileptic fit, I should think. That was the spirit talking. I'm trying to explain that whatever this essence is that makes us who we are—spirit, soul, character—sometimes lingers after we've left our bodies. People call them *ghosts*, but mostly, I like to think that it's just a remnant of their personal energies. I've detected the traces of a former countess and earl in the house, and the meek colors of an unhappy maid, and so forth, nothing particularly malevolent."

"I don't think whatever shouted *traitor* was meek or simply unhappy and it was certainly not just a color."

"Therein lies the problem." She sighed. "I don't think it happens often, but some of our journals report that stronger spirits may linger

for a purpose. A former duchess of Sommersville found a treasure protected by a prior vicar, if I remember correctly. The vicar wanted his consecrated chapel uncovered, and he hung around for centuries until he found someone with whom he could connect.”

“Presumably spirits have no sense of time and just hang about waiting for an open mind,” he said with his irrepressible humor.

“Since I haven’t conversed with one, I cannot say,” she said stiffly. “I just know that once before, when I opened myself to a patient to see if I could discern the source of their problem, I was possessed by the spirit of the patient’s mother. She was a bit of a harridan, and she—as me—began scolding the entire family for not keeping the well clean as she’d specified. I had no power to shut her up. I was only twelve and terrified.”

He kissed her forehead and her nose and held her closer. “Explain more, please.”

She shrugged. “I knew I’d gone out of my head, but I couldn’t stop the shouting. Once the spirit had me, she had a lifetime of rants to spew. Luckily, my grandfather and Fin were with me. They instinctively grabbed my hands, which brought me back to normal. Well, I fainted for a bit, I think. It’s a dreadful drain.”

“So Fin grabbing your hand today helped bring you back before the spirit could do more than vent insults?”

“And you,” she reminded him. “You are very grounded, as is Fin. I thank you for your quick action.”

“And the spirit shouting about the well—was she correct? Had they not kept their well clean?” His voice was studious and careful.

“She was correct. And the patient had become ill because they’d been careless with their water.” Bridey buried her nose deeper in his neckcloth. “I have no notion who the spirit was today. I’ve never seen her. But she wanted to kill Darrow.”

“And maybe she wishes to kill Carstairs too?” he asked, understanding what she feared to say.

Did she want to believe that *spirits* could kill? That might explain the incompetent battleax.

CHAPTER 20

“WHAT THE DEVIL has been going on down there?” Carstairs grumbled, scratching at the bandage wrapped around his head. “Sounded like a bloody circus. Tell them all to go to the devil and let a fellow rest.”

Pascoe vowed to expunge that repetitive profanity from his vocabulary so he wouldn’t sound like this nodcock, even if he had to resort to Shakespearean insults. Still shaken by Bridey’s declaration that a *spirit* meant to kill Darrow, and possibly Carstairs, he wasn’t feeling particularly diplomatic.

“Lady Carstairs exorcised your brother’s demons,” he answered in a bored drawl. “If the women are to be believed, Oscar has brought disaster by importing Irishmen without their priests, or some tomfoolery.”

For a stunning moment, the young earl actually lay silent. “Oscar’s demons?” he finally asked in confusion. “*Oscar* has demons, not Bridey?”

Ah, finally, the dawn breaks. At least Bridey’s fright had served its purpose, if he could drive a wedge between the brothers. For propriety’s sake, Pascoe had carried Bridey to a spare room and put her to bed just a little while ago. He never wanted to see the incorrigible countess so shaken and uncertain again. It was time to bring this particular task to an end, which meant removing Darrow for the nonce.

“Your brother brought in the Irishmen, did he not?” Pascoe said, swinging his monocle in feigned ennui. “You can’t blame the lady for his hiring practices. I’m not sure how to report *demons* to the king, though. His Majesty simply wants the mine and foundry to continue production. He’s a no-nonsense gentleman. I don’t think he’ll appreciate Irish ghosts.”

“It’s *Oscar’s* fault the foundry burned, not Bridey’s?” Carstairs asked in bafflement.

Pascoe frowned, even though he relished a flash of glee that the ninny-hammer had leapt to this enormous conclusion all on his own. “I hadn’t thought of it that way,” he said as if he were really pondering this asininity. “Do you think Oscar’s demons could be the ultimate source of the trouble you’re having?”

Instead of responding, Carlisle rubbed his bandaged forehead. “My head pounds like the devil.” He did look pale as he reached for

the headache powders his valet handed to him.

"Lady Carstairs has requested that the duke of Sommersville dispatch someone knowledgeable about head injuries," Pascoe reassured him.

"His Grace?" Carstairs brightened. "Bridey has summoned His Grace?"

"Convenient lady to know." Pascoe shrugged, rubbing it in a little. "Just in case there are any more Irish ghosts attached to your brother, perhaps you might send him to London to report conditions to His Majesty? That should keep him safe. Then while he's gone, I'll poke around a bit more, see if I can find any other troublemakers."

Like a malevolent spirit who wanted *Darrow* dead, not Carstairs. Did he dare believe that? It went counter to everything he'd ever understood, but if Bridey believed. . . Even if he accepted her word for it, he had no experience in negotiating murderous phantoms into surrender. He doubted the king gave rewards for exorcising ghosts.

"It's Bridey's damned brother causing the trouble at the foundry and mines. You needn't go far." The earl leaned back against his pillows, looking more tired than angry.

That was astute of the idiot. Perhaps there was hope for him yet. "Mr. Finley was not the one to import Irishmen," Pascoe reminded him. Steering Carstairs was akin to steering sheep. Or maybe chickens. "And a young man as strong as Mr. Finley did not plant an ax in your head or you'd be dead now."

That quelled any argument. Carstairs apparently preferred to believe in demons and ghosts than reality. With a few more reassurances and specious arguments, Pascoe twisted the young earl a few degrees toward the right path. Carstairs agreed to send his brother off to London and safety.

Sometime later, not finding Bridey where he'd left her, Pascoe tracked her down to a room he assumed had once been her office. Too small to be of interest to the earl, it sparkled with rainbows from crystal lamps and intrigued the eye with delicate watercolors on the golden walls. A vase of yellow roses adorned the small desk.

She looked up. Weariness shadowed her eyes. "Progress? You have only a modest look of triumph upon your face."

He wanted to wrap her in his arms again and remonstrate about resting in bed after her ordeal, but her frost queen demeanor had returned. He supposed that she was right—they needed to maintain a proper, formal connection. Where once he might have appreciated that, keeping a distance carved a hole in his entrails now. Her performance today had been dazzling, topping any stunt he'd ever performed. And he had to let her go her own rebellious way.

"Thanks to your brilliance, Darrow will be traveling to London,"

he told her. "I can't say that will cease further depredations, but it will give me time to expose his thievery if he truly has robbed the mine and not just fumbled management. I'm not certain about the spirit's accusations, though."

She dismissed his concern with a wave. "I will leave you to solve the books. I have no interest in more encounters with the unknown." She handed him a folded piece of paper. "A note from Wystan. I should return there in the morning."

Dammit, he wanted a prize for his triumph, not a penalty. Pascoe unfolded what he now recognized as a pigeon missive and scowled as he read. "I'll bring the brats here," he declared. "I should sic them on Carstairs."

"Their mother would be happier if you were with them," she agreed with a thoughtful air that Pascoe feared meant trouble. "But I doubt children will be much help in finding fraud in the estate books."

He rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Their mother is dead, and I would much rather believe she has gone to her reward. But if it means you'll stay here, I'll happily agree to bring them here."

She looked surprised. "I am a frost queen, remember? Unsuitable for young children. But my concern is that we have yet to discover who hammered Carstairs or why. I thought they might help."

He'd really had about enough quackery for the day. "The *twins*? You expect *four-year olds* to help? If Carstairs did not know who hit him, then how the—" Pascoe bit back the earl's over-used curse "—how the deuce do you expect babies to do so?"

"I don't, actually. But as you see from Theo's note, your children are clever and can hide anywhere. They communicate in a manner we don't understand, and they're into everything. People overlook them. We can't have eyes and ears all over the house, but with the twins. . ."

Pascoe frowned. "It's pointless. I hate to even ask if they'll be safe from spirits here."

"They're not safe from spirits *anywhere*," she insisted. "Wystan is riddled with them, more so than anywhere. I have no idea if Emma is conversing with any spirit other than their mother, but so far, she does not appear to be possessed."

"I don't want to believe Emma speaks with Lily," he said stubbornly. "The only reason I can even *consider* the possibility of spirits is that you insist they exist. Possession. . ." Appalled, he remembered her eerie declarations at the *exorcism*. That had been *real*?

"I don't know if I can be that open-minded," he admitted in defeat, unable to process the possibility that an ugly spirit had possessed this beautiful living creature. "Your brother turns the mansion into banshee heaven. . . how am I to know what's real?"

She didn't even bother arguing but drove a wedge right through them. "Perhaps you're right. I'll return to Wystan. That's where I belong now."

And where she'd disappear and avoid him forevermore. He wanted. . . He didn't know what he wanted. He just knew he wasn't ready to give up on what was between them, Malcolm weirdness or not. "It's obvious from the message that the brats are causing more havoc than new mothers should endure. As I said, if you promise to stay, I'll fetch them."

Her look of surprise and approval sizzled straight through him. How had he ever thought her cold?

"I have ordered the housekeeper to prepare a room for me for the night. I cannot continue sleeping in yours and pretend no one notices." She said that with a strong warning in her eye.

Pascoe didn't dare assume anything with this woman. He wanted her in his bed. She had probably ordered rooms in the attics. "Where?" he demanded.

"Next to yours." Briefly, she looked vulnerable, as if she feared he would not want her, foolish woman.

To hell with spirits and haunted children. Consumed in relief, he crossed the room, dragged her into his arms, and covered her face with kisses. "You are a woman above all others. Can we go to bed now?"

She flung her arms around him and returned his kisses with all the enthusiasm he could desire. When he was ready to tip her over the table, she pushed away.

"If I am to restore my reputation and have the servants respect me again, I will have to borrow one of the maids to act as my lady's maid. Wait an hour or so."

She sailed off without a look back, wretched woman. Pascoe watched her skirts sway and had to adjust his trousers. He pulled out his pocket watch to check the time.

And then he realized he'd just offered to bring the twins to this Bedlam in order to keep a countess in his bed.

He had officially lost his frigging mind.



BRIDEY SAT by her bedchamber fire, nervously sipping her tea. She was afraid to open her inner eye to see if any spirits lingered. Her hand strayed to the place where she'd seen the white light. Inviting in an angry spirit if there was any chance she carried new life had probably been a bad idea.

Meanwhile, she could only sit here and fret about what she

seemed to be doing with Pascoe. She had shown what she was in the worst possible way, and he hadn't flinched!

On top of all else, that had swayed her to this moment, but he was a man most likely accustomed to the silken boudoirs of experienced seductresses—she didn't even own a gossamer nightgown.

She'd allowed the maid to dress her in the voluminous linen from the previous night, but she'd discarded it as soon as the maid left her alone. She sat in her frailest shift with a flannel robe wrapped around her, eyeing the brandy decanter she'd smuggled in.

In all her bored years of marriage, she'd never considered having an affair. To be precise, she'd never considered it because she'd never found the idea of another dull clod in her bed appealing. But then, she'd never met an intelligent, broad-minded man like Pascoe, had never known this all-encompassing desire.

She hoped they could work through this lust soon so they could go their separate ways.

At a light tap on the door, her heart leaped, and she called for him to enter. Thank goodness this old wing was empty so no one would see them.

He strolled in looking dashing in his silk banyan, with his shirt open over a wide chest and rippling muscles. His black hair fell over his forehead, but he'd just shaved. She could see a smidgeon of soap near his ear, and her pulse beat even harder. He was trying to please her. When was the last time anyone had done that? *Never* came to mind.

His midnight eyes usually looked almost as black as his hair, but at sight of her, they blazed with an indigo light that drew her from the fire, straight to his arms.

"You are the goddess of sunset," he murmured, wrapping his hands in the hair she'd allowed to fall freely over her shoulders. "Why do you hide all this glory behind drab coldness?"

She savored his lingering kiss, the way his big hands stroked her back, making her feel small and sheltered. Her breasts crushed into his shirt and ached for his caress. "Better question," she whispered, planting her own kisses on his jawline, "why have I never known how exciting it feels to be touched?"

He obligingly pushed aside her robe to cup and caress her breasts through the thin shift. "I rather like the idea of my being the only one to excite you, so leave me that fancy. My imagination does not stretch to how you could be ignored for so long."

Bridey unwrapped his banyan and pushed it off his beautiful shoulders. "People see what they want to see. I've always been boring. Bridey, my grandfather's devoted daughter, George's dutiful wife, a bit too tall, a bit too gawky. Drabness and sternness made it easier for

people to overlook my youth. I'm not sure who it is you're seeing now that I am older."

"Older!" He laughed and lifted her from the floor. "I feel as if I am robbing the schoolroom. And you are the furthest thing from gawky I've ever known! I want to flaunt you all over London, let other men drool over what they cannot have, then take you home and lock you inside my bedroom so I can show you all the pleasure you've so obviously missed."

He fell backward onto the bed with her, punctuating his words with kisses and caresses that inflamed her senses.

"I will not be locked up again for any man," she warned, although she laughed as she tugged his shirt up and kissed the solid muscle of his abdomen. It was hard to be serious when he was touching her in places she'd barely touched herself.

"And there is the rift between us," he said, not laughing as he turned her over and ran his kisses down her throat. "You deserve your freedom. You are young, beautiful, and clever and should have your pick of any bright future you desire. Promise me you will not lock yourself up in a nunnery like this again."

Bridey briefly thought of the school in rural Northumberland she planned, but he didn't allow her time for more thought than that. He licked her between her legs and she nearly flew off the mattress.

She knew a great deal about medical anatomy. She knew nothing of lovemaking. It would behoove her to learn more.

Grabbing a pillow, she bit into it as Pascoe brought her to screaming pleasure over and over again.

CHAPTER 21

THE NEXT MORNING, still pleasurably sore and rather buoyant from the prior night's exertions, Bridey studied the two-story-high ground floor hall where Carstairs might have been beheaded had the ax fallen lower.

Pascoe had left her bed in the early hours of dawn, leaving her to sleep late while he went after the twins. He'd made her feel more like a woman than she had ever known possible. She was feeling invincible this morning—and determined to solve Carstairs' problems so she might move on with her life.

She'd dragged Fin into the hall with her. He'd come reluctantly, but now that the laborers had shut the mines, he had little better to do.

"If *you* did not try to behead Carstairs, then we must discover who did," she insisted. "I don't suppose you were behind the falling frames and suits of armor as well?"

"That's child's play," he said, disgruntled. "Why would I bother? Oscar had his Irish laborers do the earl's bidding. Any one of them could have deliberately set up falling frames, or just lacked the competence to do it correctly. I may have set the tureen on fire, but I had help from a disgruntled kitchen maid. It's all of a piece."

Bridey frowned. "I understand shooting at *Oscar*, but why would anyone try to kill the earl?"

Fin shrugged. "The workers all know they're being robbed. But they're more likely to try to spook the pair back where they came from. I don't think murder was ever intended."

"I thought the banshee was your idea? Are you joining them for the same reason?"

"I resurrected the banshee because Jack needed occupation, and the hole in the chimney was already there. Noise doesn't cause harm, just irritation. So, yes, I suppose I had some vague hope it would drive Carstairs away."

"Jack?" She pounced on the one unknown in this equation, the boy in the attic Pascoe had described.

Fin shrugged and studied the distant ceiling. "He found me in Edinburgh, said he had family here. But after I brought him to Northbridge, he didn't seem to have anyone minding him. He was always hanging around the manor or following me about, so I found

things to keep him out of trouble.”

Bridey almost laughed. “Banshees are your idea of keeping him out of trouble? How did he acquire that particularly piercing wail?”

“Flute, at first. Then he found a ratty bagpipe, one of the small sorts grandda used to play. That racket amplified through the chimney was classic disharmony.” Fin actually allowed himself a grin at the memory.

“A musical protégé. I’d like to meet him. Does he have a name besides Jack?”

“Not that he’s told me. He looks vaguely familiar, so I’m guessing he doesn’t want us to know his family in case he gets into trouble. I’m thinking there’s more than me who would like to see the earl and his brother gone, so his family may be encouraging him. Playing at ghosts is harmless revenge.” Fin splayed his hand along the wall, looking for whatever made axes fall, Bridey assumed.

“What happened to Carstairs was not harmless, and spirits exist,” she reminded him. “And I wish they would go inhabit Darrow instead of me,” she added meanly.

Fin shrugged. “Darrow prefers hiding at the mine or in the dower house. Otherwise, he’d have been pushed down a mine shaft or staircase long ago.”

“I trust you are not so murderous as to suggest that to anyone.” She studied the new assortment of ugly weapons on the wall, scattered among oils of equally ugly Darrow ancestors. There had once been lovely paintings of flowers and landscapes along here.

“The men mutter it without need of my instigation, so it’s good he’ll be on his way to London. Have you any notion of who you channeled yesterday?”

“Not a one,” she admitted. “I’ve never seen her aura before. Perhaps Darrow has strangled some maid and no one has missed her. Or she may have attached herself to a family member, as the twins’ mother does to them.”

He grimaced. “I have to believe you, but I’d rather deal with live humans and physical evidence. Do you think Mr. Pascoe has any chance of changing anything? If not, I may have to take you up on that offer to go to the Americas. I cannot remain idle forever.” He lifted a heavy painting to check its fastening.

Bridey felt the familiar stab of anguish at the notion of parting with the last of her family, but she would sacrifice her heart for the good of her brother, if necessary. He would be as alone in the world as she if he left, so she’d rather avoid the necessity.

“Lord Ashford might be able to use you in some of his enterprises, if you wish to stay in England. But if you are intent on burying yourself in rural obscurity, I would not give up on Mr. Pascoe just

yet.”

That was the first note of hope she'd been able to issue since events had gone out of hand. Bridey held her lamp higher, trying to see through the dark shadows of the high ceiling.

“I am known here,” Fin said with a shrug. “And I know the men who can help me. I am more interested in machinery than fame or fortune. I've drawn up plans to make the blast furnace even more productive, should Mr. Pascoe find a way to eliminate Darrow.”

“I cannot see how he will, but he seems to think it's possible.”

Fin shot her a quick look. “Not too long ago, you would never have agreed that I might stay in Northbridge. Are you saying you trust Mr. Pascoe to make things right?”

Apparently, she was. But she was not ready to admit aloud that a man might have his uses. “I admit nothing,” she said vaguely. “But until we know more, I'd feel much better if we could keep Carstairs alive. I just cannot fathom anyone bringing that ax down on his head without anyone seeing them do so.”

“Barker says he saw nothing, and he was closest.” Fin glanced into the study where the butler had been. “But if he was clearing off the tray on the desk, it would be impossible for him to see behind him.”

Bridey continued down to the billiard parlor, counting steps. “The two gentlemen in here vouch for each other, so they would have had to act in tandem to be guilty. Who else was nearby?”

“Most everyone was in the salon.” Fin gestured to the front of the house. “Guests might come and go without anyone paying notice, but they couldn't have seen Carstairs emerge from his study in time to attack him. Someone would have had to have been lying in wait, and there really are no good hiding places, unless one hung from the ceiling.” With a frown, he turned his attention upward.

“Pascoe says he was at the front door. He didn't notice anyone leaving the salon, although I suppose servants may have been running up and down a bit.” She had hired most of the house servants. She hated thinking ill of them.

“When was that timber installed?” Fin held his lamp higher.

Bridey bent her head back to examine the rough-hewn wood far above her head. “That's new. Are they trying to build a minstrel's gallery or some such folly up there? There seem to be faint lines that might be a door to allow access.”

Fin walked backward down the hall until he could see what she did. “They've had carpenters in here for months but cleared them out before the guests arrived. It does appear to be an unfinished balcony of sorts.”

“The same carpenters who did such a fine job removing hundred-

year-old paintings from the wainscoting?" Bridey asked dryly. "How do we reach that door?"

"I doubt that it's safe. If that is supposed to be a balcony, there are no braces to hold it up, and no rail to prevent falls. The idiot has hired idiots." Fin studied the location of the wall and loped toward the stairs. "Stay here. I think I know where the door should be."

Bridey lingered in the back corridor, taking in all the changes that had been made to the once-gracious home. It had never really been hers. George hadn't liked change, so she'd only been able to add a few inexpensive watercolors here and there, a brighter drapery or wallpaper if the old had faded. She'd quit studying the lovely architecture after her first few years of marriage. She felt as if she were in a stranger's home now.

Lady Neville, Lady Belinda's mother, emerged from a doorway that connected to the breakfast room. Seeing Bridey, she nodded greeting. "Good morning, my lady. Are you admiring the gallery Carstairs intends to build for my daughter? She does enjoy music. It is quite a clever idea to build one up there as if this were a medieval hall, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes, clever indeed," Bridey said with a trace of dryness. "But you might ask him to hire an architect before he allows even so much as a lute player to actually stand on it." Remembering the guilt she'd seen in the lady's aura, she studied her closely. "Carstairs has not told me of the happy occasion yet. Have the banns been called?"

Lady Neville waved her rounded hand. "The solicitors are arguing at this stage, so no announcements are being made. We are hoping for an autumn wedding." Without showing any visible sign of nervousness, she glanced up at the timber that was the only evidence of the gallery from this angle. "The platform is not stable?"

Fin chose that moment to open the nearly imperceptible door in the wall above. Instead of stepping out, he ran his hand over the wall to either side, then got down on his knees to examine the platform. Returning to his feet, he glanced down at Bridey. Seeing Lady Neville, he waved, then disappeared back into whatever room he'd invaded, closing the door behind him.

Lady Neville frowned a little. "Your brother is not a very talkative young man."

But he was a sight smarter than Carlisle, Bridey refrained from saying. "We're all different in different ways," she said without inflection. "I congratulate Lady Belinda on her upcoming nuptials. I think she'll be a splendid addition to the household. Carstairs needs her."

Lady Neville beamed. "Thank you, I shall tell her you said so. She was a trifle intimidated by you at first, so it's good to know that you

approve. I have never believed in ghosts until you settled the banshee yesterday. Latin prayer was a true stroke of genius.”

“Yes, well, one learns such things living in these parts,” Bridey said vaguely, wondering how she would get rid of the woman so Fin could tell her what he’d found.

“I heard Mr. Darrow has rode off to see the king,” Lady Neville confided in a whisper. “I had not realized until recently that Carstairs is His Majesty’s godson!”

Bridey tried not to do a happy jig at this confirmation of Darrow’s removal. “His Majesty will be most concerned to hear about the earl’s injury. It is imperative that we find who is behind these acts. May we count on you and Lady Belinda to aid us in our inquiries, if necessary?”

“I had thought them accidents,” she said in confusion. “The ax did not just fall from the wall?”

Fin arrived in time to prevent Bridey from thumping the woman on the head to see if there was anything inside her brain pan. He bowed and said nothing, obviously waiting for Lady Neville to depart. The woman tittered a little, then excused herself to rush upstairs and no doubt spread the word that Carstairs hadn’t stuck an ax in the back of his own head for fun.

“Carstairs is building the gallery for his lady love,” Bridey said. “What did you find?”

“It needs only a good sound blow to send it tumbling.” Fin crossed his arms and studied the timber. “There is also a bolt with a piece of wire attached in the wood.”

He made that sound significant. Bridey tried to picture the use of a bolt, as if she had any notion what one was. “I give up. What is a bolt?”

“It is used to hold things in place, like the paintings to the wall. But this bolt is in the floor of that death trap up there. Someone attached a wire to it, possibly a picture-hanging wire. And then when Carstairs walked beneath, they cut it.”

He sounded grim. Bridey thought she was understanding, but she could not imagine how it would work. “They hung the ax on the end of the wire?” she asked incredulously.

“That would be my surmise. Wrapped around the handle, just below the ax head. Someone hiding in the closet above could wait for Carstairs to emerge from his study, cut the wire, and let the ax fall. If all worked well, it would look as if it had been swung downward. If it didn’t work,” he shrugged, “then it’s just one more mishap among the others. The chance of it being fatal was small.”

“As we suspected, someone is attempting to drive him from his own home,” Bridey concluded.

“And pin it on ghosts or shoddy workmanship. That gallery, though, if hit with a heavy weight, could potentially kill someone from either above or below.”

“And Pascoe is bringing his children here!” Bridey stared at the timber in alarm. “That door must be sealed off!”

“The door is in the back of a cupboard from which shelves have been removed, just the sort of place children might like to hide. I’ll lock the hinges, then screw in a few strategic bars so the door can’t open.”

“Shall I ask Mrs. Mayes if she wants the shelves returned? That would be her linen cupboard, if I’m guessing the location correctly. She keeps a key to it.”

Fin nodded, still looking grim. “Fill it up, lock it, and I’ll add a latch on top so the children can’t reach it.”

“I don’t like this, Fin,” Bridey whispered, laying her hand on his arm.

“Neither do I. They’ll be blaming me and my men next.” He stalked off.

And she’d already allowed them to believe the Irish laborers were to blame, because she’d been feeling spiteful for the rumors they’d spread about her.

She shivered, wondering who in the household had such a devious mind—besides her brother.



WHEN THE CARRIAGE stopped in front of the manor, Pascoe dismounted and gave his reins to the stable hand. He waited for the footman to open the carriage door, then lifted his docile, curious brats down. The footman handed out Bridey’s maid and one of the Marys who had accompanied them. The children gawked at the grand manor as if they’d never seen a house before. Well, possibly, they hadn’t. They never went farther than the park in the city, and townhouses didn’t involve this level of space.

As if she’d been watching for them, Bridey flew down the front steps, with Fin’s deerhounds on her heels. Her presence was worth every minute of effort Pascoe had brought to this moment—which was considerable. Aster had not wanted any of them to leave and had insisted that Bridey be returned at once. Theo had almost locked him up. Pascoe had never thought he’d have to use diplomacy on his own damned family.

And now—Bridey didn’t look happy to see him. *That* was one more unhelpful attitude than he needed right now. He strode up to meet her, wishing he had the right to take her in his arms and hug her

until she smiled again.

"I was wrong to bring them here," she whispered, casting a worried glance to the children. "You should take them to Fin's house. This place is littered with dangerous traps."

"So you brought in the hounds to sniff them out?" he asked dubiously, unable to keep his hand from straying to the auburn strands flying about her flushed cheeks.

Even if he didn't believe Aster's predictions from the stars, he had to listen to Bridey's fears.

"Fin is training the dogs to sniff for strangers. I'm sorry. I should never have. . ."

Pascoe touched a finger to her nose. "Don't. We'll work this out together."

The hounds surrounded Pascoe, sniffing and yipping, then rushed off to greet the carriage occupants. He turned to verify that Emma had a firm hold on their new pet. Finally recovering from awe, Edward tried to stroke the tail-wagging hounds while Emma clung to the kitten. The maids busied themselves with ordering the luggage and footmen about.

At Pascoe's call, his children hastened to make their bow and curtsy. They never talked excitedly, but Emma held up her kitty, and Edward showed Bridey the makeshift pap they used to feed her.

Bridey smiled in delight and crouched down to examine the kitten and exclaim over the feeding device. The children beamed as if they'd been handed the sun and the moon. And Pascoe knew he was in deeper trouble than all his diplomatic experience could resolve.

"I've told Mrs. MacTavish that you'll be coming," Bridey said, standing up again. "She's ready for you. I'm so sorry. . ."

 She signaled the footmen to stop the unloading.

Pascoe frowned. "We won't go without you," he said, fixing his gaze on her. He saw no remnant of the frost queen he'd first encountered. Her eyes were ablaze with life. Beneath his gaze, her cheeks colored a lovely rose.

And the stubborn set of her plush lips said he would never be able to command her.

"I can't leave Fin here alone. Whoever is setting these traps might intend to blame him or the Irish or the miners or any number of innocent people. We need eyes in the back of our heads at every minute."

"Then tell Fin to leave. Neither of you is responsible for whatever happens—Carstairs is. He is the one who needs to set guards, hire people to hunt down the traps, do whatever is necessary to make the place safe for his guests. If Darrow is gone, I will appropriate the estate books and carry them to your place. We don't need to stay

here.”

Her eyes widened. He could see the protest clearly rising, and he crossed his arms, daring her to speak it.

“There aren’t enough beds,” she finally murmured. “I’d have to put you in the infirmary. The twins slept in Fin’s room last time. We’d need beds for the servants. . . I’ve not lived in that house for over a decade. It’s a bit primitive.”

“Primitive suits the brats.” He caught Edward’s collar before the boy could wander off to follow a butterfly. “Mary can have a cot with the twins. Fin will have to sleep on the sofa in the study. I would sleep with you and leave your maid to the infirmary, but that’s your choice.”

She colored even more, then straightened. “This is not London. I cannot scandalize the village, or even Mrs. MacTavish. I will stay here. Your duty is to your children.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “My duty is also to the king. You are telling me I must choose.”

She crossed her arms and glared back. “The king does not care about your children. Who else will? You cannot risk bringing them in here, and there’s an end on it.”

He wanted to rip out his hair. He’d brought the brats here so he could spend more time in her company. And now she was telling him she wouldn’t share his bed again?

That notion nearly ripped him apart along invisible seams. Without a thought to what he was saying, he nearly growled at her. “Fine then. We’ll ride across the border and say vows before an iron monger. Is that what it takes to settle your conscience and the gossips?”

He was as appalled as she looked as the words registered.

She recovered faster. Donning her icy cloak, she took the hands of the twins away from him. “I would never marry another man who put his concerns above mine and his *children*. I’ll take the twins. You can stay here and do your duty.”

The children eagerly followed her back to the carriage.

Pascoe was the one left standing there, feeling an icy wind blow through him as if he were no more substantial than a specter.

CHAPTER 22

“CAN YOU HEAR MAMA?” Emma asked, sitting on Fin’s bed and braiding the wool hair of one of Bridey’s old dolls. “Edward can.”

“I cannot,” Edward said staunchly from the other side of the bed. “I am not a girl. I hear *you*.”

Bridey was glad she’d sent Mary to fetch warm glasses of milk so the nursemaid didn’t hear this. She brushed out Emma’s long dark curls. “I can almost *see* your mama, but I cannot hear her,” she said matter-of-factly. She didn’t want the children to realize how strange they sounded to others. Or perhaps they already knew, and that was why they did not speak unless questioned. “Edward, do you only hear what Emma tells you about your mother?”

He shrugged and took apart one of Fin’s toy soldiers. “Mostly, I do not listen. Girls say silly things.”

Emma smacked him with her doll. “I do not. You heard about our new mama.”

He grabbed the doll and held it upside down to inspect how her legs were sewn on, then threw it back. “You were very loud. You hurt my head.”

“Can you hear what Emma is thinking now?” Bridey asked, trying to understand since Pascoe had said the twins hadn’t talked until recently. They seemed to have a well-developed vocabulary and understanding of correct sentence structure for children who had just started speaking.

Edward wrinkled up his little nose and considered it. “She’s calling me a poopy-head.”

Emma beamed. “That’s because you are a poopy-head.”

Oh dear—Edward had *heard* his sister? Emma had not spoken aloud. If they could plan silently. . . It might explain their escape artistry.

Bridey began braiding Emma’s thick curls. “It’s not nice to call people names, even inside your head.” She thought she said that evenly, without shouting a thousand questions. “Can you hear what is inside my head?”

Both children shook their dark curls. She prayed they weren’t lying, because what was inside her head was how much they looked like their handsome father, which led to images of how magnificent he had looked last night lying naked in her bed—a sight she might never

see again.

"I hear a loud lady now," Emma said helpfully. "She's not mama."

Tread gently, Bridey reminded herself as she sought a response. She wished she remembered more of the Malcolm journals that explained how to talk to children about their unusual abilities. "Is she saying anything now?"

Edward didn't seem in the least interested. He climbed out from the covers to find another soldier.

"She's mostly angry." Emma returned to braiding her doll's hair. "Mama feels sorry for her and says I should not listen to her bad words."

The hair on the back of Bridey's neck rose. "Perhaps you can ask your mama why the lady is angry?"

Emma wrinkled up her brow as if straining to think about a difficult problem. "It's about the boy, but he's not here now." She set her doll on the pillow, evidently satisfied with the hair. "Will you kiss us goodnight and tuck us in?"

Addressing adult situations through a child's mind and a spirit's limited understanding. . . was more bewildering than helpful.

"Of course." Bridey tugged the child's long braid over her shoulder and kissed Emma's brow. "Sweet dreams, sugar plum."

Emma giggled. "Apple tarts."

Hoping that made sense to a four-year-old and had nothing to do with voices, Bridey went around to the far side of Fin's bed. She pressed a kiss to Edward's brow. "What do you dream of?"

"Horses," he said firmly. "And puppies. And sometimes kittens."

The kitten was curled up asleep in a basket of rags beneath the nursery table. It seemed to be doing remarkably well for having been removed from its mother so early.

"Then sweet dreams of puppy dogs. Mary will be here with your milk shortly."

"Will Papa come kiss us goodnight?" Emma asked.

"If he does, it will be very late. You will have to feel him in your sleep." Bridey opened the door for the maid and her tray.

"We know when he comes in," Edward said cheerfully. "He smells like night."

Night air, she assumed, because Pascoe would only stop in the nursery after he'd been out half the night, working the king's business. Or his family's. Or anything other than staying with his children.

She had set up a bed in the infirmary for him, just in case he wished to be here. She suspected that most of the time he didn't even consider going home to tuck the twins in. Most men didn't, so she couldn't censure him for doing as he'd been taught. But it gave her a better understanding of why Malcolm women were more sensitive to

their gifts—because they'd been brought up to spend time with their children and recognized their differences. Men simply didn't.

Rather than set up a cot in her room, she sent her maid to sleep in the attic. She wouldn't have a lady's maid much longer if she remained here. Nora was accustomed to the privacy of the manor and lording it over the other servants.

Bridey realized she, too, had become accustomed to the spacious elegance of the Carstairs manor. Grandda's house was no longer home. But neither was the manor. And she was beginning to doubt that Wystan could be. Had Pascoe been right that she shouldn't bury herself in obscurity—as she had criticized Fin for doing? There was an entire world out there she should explore—was she afraid to do so?

Yes, frankly. The world was full of wickedness and ugly spirits she didn't wish to encounter. Wystan was the only refuge she'd known after fleeing Northbridge.

Bridey beat her pillow and tried to settle into sleep. She was still tossing well past midnight when she heard Pascoe slip down the hall. Or at least, she hoped it was Pascoe and not a stranger. She'd had Fin give him a key since they had no footmen.

He passed her door on his way to the children's room, but she'd ordered the maid to put her cot in front of the nursery door to prevent wandering. That had been bad of her. She hadn't really expected him to return.

She heard him retreat and return to her door. She'd debated locking it, but that would have been cutting off her nose to spite her face. She wanted to know if he'd discovered anything. And she desperately wished to have him close, if only for a night or two more. Her heart beat erratically as she heard him hesitate, then push the latch.

He let himself in quietly, sat down, and began to remove his boots. For his presumption, she flung a pillow at him. He caught it and tossed it back. Realizing the childishness of her ill humor, she sat up. "I'm sorry I blocked the nursery. I didn't want them wandering."

"As long as they can escape in case of fire," he said pragmatically.

The man never displayed an ounce of anger, compassion, or any volatile emotion. She, on the other hand, had apparently been waiting to instigate a fight. More pillow throwing required.

With a sigh of annoyance, she crossed her arms. "That's why there is a maid with them. Fire will be their next play toy. You cannot be with them every minute, so they must have other adults in their lives."

"An entire army of adults," he said gruffly, dropping his shoes and standing to struggle out of his coat. "I would appreciate it more if I was not shut out like the enemy."

Ah, a hint of frustration, nice start. “My fault. I did not think you would return. The beds are much more comfortable at the manor.”

“The beds at the manor do not have you in them.”

That lovely comment alone almost melted the irritation out of her. Bridey sat in bed, hugging her knees, basking in this rare moment of intimacy.

He hung his coat over a chair back and started on his linen. “It’s a houseful of ninny-hammers, and I could not tolerate their company for long. I spent the hours working my way through the estate office. Darrow is very bad at simple bookkeeping, but he has a grasp of how to move funds. He has emptied the estate coffers without leaving a trace, and the books don’t show what has become of the substantial investments your husband left. I need to write to Carstairs’ solicitors and brokers.”

Bridey chided herself for letting him continue his presumptuous undressing, but she couldn’t make herself stop him. He was speaking to her as an equal, as someone who understood and might aid him, and that was as enthralling as her physical attraction. “Mr. Myers in Edinburgh handled all of George’s financial business. He would know if the investments were transferred and to where. He’s one of the reasons we have the pigeons. Grandda used him too.”

Pascoe stopped unfastening his waistcoat. “I need to send a pigeon immediately, then. Is there some way of differentiating his pigeons from the others?”

She flung the pillow again. “You are obsessive! Is the king’s business all you can think of?”

He crossed the small room in two strides, kneeled over her, and planted his big hands on either side of her head. “No, this is all I can think of.” He leaned over and caught her mouth and wouldn’t relent when she struggled. He did smell of *night*. And man. And her blood heated as he wooed her with the caresses he’d learned she liked best.

She didn’t struggle long.



FEELING in harmony with the world for the first time all day, Pascoe rolled over on his back, pulling his naked countess on top of him. He’d not even removed half his clothing. Without his valet, they’d be wrinkled beyond redemption. And he didn’t care. He inhaled deeply of gardenias and bliss. Her lush body had him rising to the occasion again like a prime adolescent.

“That was. . . vigorous,” she murmured with a hint of humor.

“Irritate me some more,” he whispered back. “I love winning arguments this way.”

She chuckled and kissed his chest. "You have not won, sir. You did precisely what I wished you to do."

"I still mean to send a pigeon to Myers, if you will tell me which ones to set loose. The sooner I arrive at the bottom of this business, the sooner I can take the children home and get on with hunting a new nanny. Unless, of course, you wish to consider the anvil solution."

He'd almost convinced himself that marriage was the only way to deal with his children, and that Bridey was the only woman who could do so. He didn't dare consider the notion closely because what might work for him, with some reservation, was all wrong for her. She confirmed his fear swiftly enough.

She rolled off him and pulled the covers around her. "The pigeons in the red cage are the ones you want. And I will not marry to be a nursemaid. I intend to teach an entire generation of young women how to take care of themselves and give them an opportunity to survive without men, if necessary. I doubt the roar of public outrage that will ensue fits into your plans."

He sighed and sat up. "I doubt if a wife in prison fits into any man's plans. They used to arrest women like you on charges of witchcraft. These days, they will no doubt incarcerate you for practicing medicine without a license, or a prick. It's not what I want for you, but it's your choice, I agree."

He fastened his trousers and hunted for his shoes in the dark.

She did not throw her pillow at him as he walked out. That worried him more than he cared to admit.

He stopped in the study to write a message to the estate's man of business and plodded to the roof to send it. He hoped this Myers person had a reliable servant checking for pigeons every day. So far, pigeons seemed to be more efficient than sending messengers all over creation or relying on the mail when one was in the country. He ought to persuade Ashford to train a few for Iveston.

Returning from the tower, lamp in hand, he checked the bed in the infirmary and discovered Bridey had made it up for him, just as she'd promised. He remembered the cot as being lumpy and cold, but he had to respect her desire to protect her family and servants from scandal. Morosely, he discarded his coat over the lumpy cot and prepared to sleep alone.

He wasn't sure how he would survive without her when he returned to London. For a man who'd been on his own practically since birth, that was a shameful admission. He was just beginning to realize he'd treated Lily much in the same way as he treated the children—as part of the house furnishings, one of those things a man acquires with maturity.

Sometimes, he wasn't very bright. No wonder Bridey flung

pillows at him.



AFTER A RESTLESS NIGHT, Pascoe put himself together with the wrinkled clothes in his valise and went to check on the children. He heard their excited chatter in the study before he even reached the room where they'd slept. That they finally talked filled him with relief and gladness. It was their topics that he dreaded. He opened the door to see what mischief they might be into.

Fin Finley sat at his desk looking even more rumpled than Pascoe felt. The twins were climbing over the massive deerhounds.

Relieved to see them occupied in an innocent pastime, Pascoe settled his gaze on the young ruffian slumped on the cracked leather couch that Fin had probably slept on last night. The lad reeked of unhappiness and something Pascoe associated with loneliness. And he looked as if he'd been sleeping in gutters—or attics, since this was the miscreant he'd caught creating banshee noises.

Pascoe entered, closed the door, and leaned against it. "Introduce me."

Looking startled, the lad scanned for another exit. Since the room was windowless, he'd have to climb the chimney. Pascoe folded his arms and blocked the only escape.

"The twins found him skulking in the storage tower," Fin explained.

Pascoe rubbed a hand over his eyes. "How did the twins get in the tower? I thought we'd agreed that it be kept locked?"

Fin shrugged. "They're your children. You ask."

The twins were paying no attention to this discussion, and theirs was the lesser concern. Pascoe was nothing if not focused, and instinct warned the boy had some connection to Carstairs' problems. Boys did not generally loiter about strange adults for no reason. "Right now, I want a proper introduction to this gentleman who lurks in towers and attics."

The lad huddled on the couch in his thin rags, not looking at anyone. He didn't look much older than eleven, an age where Pascoe would expect any normal boy to appear grimy if unsupervised. From the smell of him, he'd been unattended for a long while, though.

"Jack, introduce yourself," Fin commanded.

"Mama says he can't," Emma piped up from grooming the hound with her fingers. "He'll be killed."

Even the lad looked stunned. Warily, he studied the little girl still in her nightgown, but he still didn't speak.

Pascoe glanced at Fin, who shrugged and said, "I'll fetch Bridey."

“And food,” Pascoe suggested. That Fin, an engineer, accepted his sister’s weird abilities was interesting. “He looks half-starved.”

“Mrs. Mac stores hams and root vegetables in the tower. He’s not starved,” Fin said callously as Pascoe opened the door to let him pass.

Pascoe desperately wanted to send the twins back to the nursery, to keep them out of whatever tragedy the lad carried with him, but weirdly, they appeared to be key to information he needed.

“Emma, Edward, perhaps you would care to explain why you are out of your room?” Pascoe asked after Fin left, letting the lad sit and shiver a while longer.

“Roscoe told us there’s a stranger,” Edward said, hugging one of the huge hounds.

“Roscoe?” Pascoe asked, praying that was a servant or the nursemaid’s last name and knowing it was not.

Edward nodded emphatically. “He is a smart dog. So is Rosy.” He nodded at the dog Emma was grooming. “She helped us find the boy.”

Pascoe raised a questioning eyebrow at the lad, just in case he cared to explain more coherently. Shaggy-haired and wild-eyed, the boy just shook his head and hugged the pillow Fin must have slept on last night.

Hearing Bridey’s quick footsteps on the wooden floor, accompanied by her brother’s heavier ones, Pascoe stepped aside and opened the door. Even at this early hour, after only a few hours of sleep, his countess looked marvelous in dishabille. He recognized the frill of the linen shift and the old flannel robe that dragged the ground, preventing him from seeing if her toes were bare. She’d tied her hair with a ribbon and let it fall in all its abundant fiery splendor over her breast.

He felt better already.

While Fin settled behind the desk, Bridey turned her attention to the twins.

“You have upset Mary again,” she scolded. “It doesn’t matter how good your intentions were, you should have waited for her to return with your porridge before you ran off. She’s frantic, and it’s very mean to worry her.”

Both children had the sense to look appalled. Pascoe had no idea if they were sincere, but he supposed it didn’t hurt if someone pointed out the problems their carelessness caused. They scrambled to their feet and performed awkward courtesies.

“We wanted to play with the doggies. We will ’pologize,” Edward said bravely, although his bottom lip quivered.

They were four years old! Pascoe wanted to pound his head against the wall, if only because he felt helpless. How could a child of that age understand consequences?

“You will apologize, and you will eat your porridge cold for your rudeness. But right now, we need to know how you got into the tower.” Bridey completely ignored the lad on the sofa.

Fin settled back into his wobbly desk chair to watch the show. Pascoe wished he could do the same. Usually, he was the one to sit back and let others argue, but these were his children. However much he disliked it, this time, he was mired in this byzantine imbroglio, and Bridey was his only guide.

Emma beamed. “Mrs. Mac opened the door to let the doggies out of the food room.”

“Roscoe and Rosy, right?” Pascoe added, just to confirm this particular weirdness.

Bridey sent him a surprised look but kept silent while she waited for an answer.

Edward nodded but said nothing more.

Make them use their words. . . . “Why were you in the kitchen?” he inquired, with no idea what he *ought* to be asking.

“We like rashers, not porridge,” Emma explained.

He thought he heard Bridey giggle. He sent her a cross look. “See if you can do better.”

She crouched down to pet one of the dogs. “How do you know their names are Roscoe and Rosy?”

“Because they said so,” Edward declared. “And they needed to go out, so I told Mrs. Mac.”

Pascoe was unable to work out this peculiar response fast enough to question, so he left it to Bridey, who seemed to understand, which gave him a distinct pain in the gut.

“You followed Mary to the kitchen to tell Mrs. Mac that you wanted rashers, heard the dogs say they wanted out of the tower, and told Mrs. Mac?” Bridey asked, obviously clarifying the situation for clueless listeners.

They both nodded, but Emma was the one who answered. “Mama said the angry lady was worried, and we should find the boy.”

Pascoe dug his fingers into his palms and bit his tongue on a roar. He was a rational man and this was an irrational conversation. But he was also trained to listen to all sides without reaction. Bridey and the children deserved that respect—a fact she’d been trying to pound into his thick head, he supposed.

Perhaps he needed to heed his gut and his nose more often. While his brain screamed in denial and wanted to walk out, his instincts. . . were to listen.

“The angry lady is still here?” Bridey asked in concern, obviously understanding more than Pascoe did.

Emma tilted her head as if hearing otherworldly voices. “No, but

Mama says the lady is Jack's mama."

Pascoe waited for ghosts to wail, lights to blink, and thumps to rattle the walls, but when no mystical eccentricities intruded, he turned his attention to the lad—who squirmed. "Shall I ask you again for an introduction?"

Jack looked unhappy. "I'm just Jack."

"And are the children right that you believe you will be killed if we know your real name?" Pascoe asked, keeping condemnation out of his voice.

"Jack's mother thinks he'll be *killed*?" Bridey asked in surprise, not having heard that earlier explosive revelation.

Emma nodded and spoke more bravely. "Mama says that is why the lady is angry, a'cause Jack should live in the great big house."

Instinct said his beautiful daughter had not spoken in the past because no one except her twin listened—or they criticized what she said. Now that Bridey was there to translate for her, Emma readily spoke. Pascoe wasn't entirely certain that was a good thing if she only spoke in mysteries.

"And what do the dogs have to say about that?" he asked, losing patience with this bizarre interrogation.

Edward shrugged. "They only smell strangers. They know Jack and just want their bones."

He was supposed to believe that Emma spoke to ghosts and Edward read the mind of dogs? Pascoe really needed to go for a long, long walk, preferably to Scotland and beyond.

Bridey looked worried. She was his bulwark in this perplexing domain, so Pascoe figured he wouldn't go anywhere soon. Their conversation was like a book in a foreign language he couldn't read but hoped she could decipher.

"Can you ask if Jack was named after his papa?" Bridey questioned, out of the blue.

Where the deuce was she going with. . . ? Recalling the research he'd been doing on the Darrows since he arrived, Pascoe almost choked and froze in expectation. Really? She didn't really believe this grubby scalawag. . . who spoke educated English, Pascoe recalled. He bit his tongue and did what he did best.

Emma tilted her head again, then nodded uncertainly. "I think so. Mama is unhappy, and it's hard to hear her. May I have rashers now?"

Pascoe wanted to scream his frustration. Interrogating children on impossible subjects was not the way things got done.

Bridey accepted their limitations with more patience. "Even though you were both very naughty, you may ask Mary if she thinks you might have rashers with your porridge. You must go back to the nursery and make your apologies, though."

Bridey stood, took them by their hands, and waited for Pascoe to move from the door.

As he opened the panel to let her pass, she murmured, “Jonathan Darrow was George’s middle brother who died a decade ago. We thought he was a widower with two grown daughters. *Jack* is the family diminutive for Jonathan.”

Pascoe felt his gut twist as if she’d knifed him—she wanted him to believe that *his daughter* was speaking to spirits from beyond. And that he should act on the impossibility.

Apparently Bridey’s brother not only understood the significance of Bridey’s declaration, but believed her. Fin was studying the terrified boy with unholy glee.

CHAPTER 23

LEAVING the children with their nursemaid, Bridey hurried to her room to dress, her mind racing in a thousand directions at once.

Could there be another heir? No, that was impossible. How could no one have known. . . ?

Darrow.

A pall of dreadful certainty dropped over her. Oscar Darrow was as single-minded as Pascoe at his worst. She'd seen it, had known the obsession was there, but Darrow's muddled aura had been too frightening to study closely. She had just assumed he was like the many single-minded men she'd known, especially ambitious ones.

She should have considered how far a man without a conscience would take his obsession. The estate came with extensive wealth—a wealth he and his brother would lose should another heir be found. Cutting out a young boy from his inheritance would be child's play if Jack had no one to stand up for him. He could even justify it by believing adults could better care for the mines than a child.

Stabbing pins in her hair, she hurried out and almost ran over Mrs. MacTavish bearing a heavy tray. "You shouldn't be carrying that," Bridey scolded. "Tell Fin he needs to fetch his own breakfast if he doesn't want to eat at a proper table." She took the tray away.

"Aye, and let him think I cannae do my duties?" the elderly housekeeper asked indignantly.

"Aye, and let him know you need more help around here," Bridey said in the mocking tone she'd used as a child. "Paying more wages will teach him to burn down his income with his furnaces. Go on back and put your feet up. I'll send someone to fetch the tea."

She kicked the door until Pascoe opened it. He removed the tray from her hands. He looked as rumpled and tired as she felt, but the look of appreciation he bestowed on her gave her strength. Or maybe it was the food he appreciated. "Let me send my maid down to fetch tea," she told him. "Don't let the boy go until I'm back."

By the time she returned to the study, the men had divided up Mrs. Mac's fare between themselves, leaving Bridey a plate, a piece of toast, and some ham. She stole a forkful of Pascoe's eggs, wrapped the toast around her ham, and settled onto the sofa beside the boy. Hesitantly, she opened her inner eye and found narrow streaks of the distinctive Carstairs muddy blue and lemon yellow in his aura.

She hastily shut down before his furious mother could invade her mind again—because his mother had to be the furious spirit who had shouted *Usurper*. She was starting to learn that protective mothers were a force to be feared, even after death.

“So, did your father legally marry your mother and do you have papers to prove it?” Bridey asked before taking a bite of her toast.

The boy froze. She didn’t even need to open her mind’s eye to recognize his panic. Her assumption was right then. Jack believed that he was Jonathan Darrow’s son, her late husband’s next oldest brother. Had he been alive, Jonathan would have inherited, thus making Jack true heir to the Carstairs title and estate. Fantasies seldom came true, so she wouldn’t rely on this one just yet.

Pascoe settled wearily in a wing chair and regarded her almost with distaste. “You are as bad as the twins. Use your words for us lesser mortals.”

“Roscoe and Rosy are really Sir Ivan and Countess Rosalyn,” Fin said, irrelevantly. “I never told the children their names.”

“But you call them Rascal and Rosy,” Bridey pointed out, fascinated with the possibilities. “Children merely repeat what they think they hear, without understanding. Does Edward hear the sounds the dogs hear? Is he translating dog language or images? I cannot imagine that dogs think clearly, if they think at all. Clairaudience is not an understood discipline, even if he was hearing *people*. Hearing animals—”

“Stop it!” Pascoe roared.

His fury was so unusual that Bridey stared, as did Fin and the boy. Amazed that the usually courteous gentleman actually had a fuse to be lit, Bridey watched him with interest.

“You are expecting me to believe that my son reads the minds of dogs and my daughter reads the minds of. . .” He glared at Jack. “I’m assuming your mother is dead and Emma is not reading *your* mind?”

“She’s dead.” The boy defiantly ripped off another bite of toast without explaining more.

“So I am supposed to believe that Emma is talking to his mother’s *ghost*?” Pascoe asked Bridey angrily.

“Now you’re willing to listen to what I’ve been telling you all along?” she asked, inexplicably delighted with his ill humor.

“Do I have a choice? It’s either believe my children hear voices I cannot, or believe they are insane, and I refuse to believe the latter. Yet,” he added gloomily.

Bridey wanted to pat him on his head, but she wouldn’t antagonize him when he was finally listening.

“Not that I can actually tell what happens inside your daughter’s head, mind you,” Bridey qualified, “But I have read instances of

Malcolms who have a spirit guide on the other side who can communicate with souls who have passed on. They are called mediums by the general public, but that appellation is associated with charlatans. I would not recommend applying it to Emma, who is merely hearing her mother, not every spirit in the universe.”

Pascoe glared at her, threw back his hot tea as if it were whiskey, glared at the cup, and slammed it back to the table. “And my late wife is chatting with Jack’s dead mother as if they’re old pals gossiping in. . .” He gestured helplessly. “Heaven, the afterlife, the hereafter, whatever.”

“My mother’s name is Helen,” Jack said with his first sign of interest. “Do you think your daughter could ask her where the marriage papers are?”

Pascoe slammed his dish on the table and stalked out.

Bridey resisted the urge to follow. She met Fin’s eyes. Her brother shrugged.

Some people had difficulty accepting the supernatural. Jack Darrow—if that was really his name—apparently was not one of them, which was suspicious in itself.



HAVING PAID Fin’s overworked servants to launder his linen and press his clothes, Pascoe rode back to the madhouse manor under a simmering black cloud of bleak humor. The twins were children. They could not talk to the beyond, or even to dogs. They just had active imaginations.

He didn’t believe his own lies. He simply needed some normality in which to ground himself. He should ride back to Wystan and talk to Theo. There was a man with a solid, no-nonsense head on his shoulders. Theo would look at Pascoe as if he were crazed when he told his tale, then shrug, and tell him to talk to Aster—who would read star charts and agree with Bridey. There, he’d saved himself a trip.

Pascoe was almost relieved to recognize the liveried servant holding two costly thoroughbreds in the manor drive. The duke had arrived amazingly swiftly after receiving Bridey’s message.

Pascoe handed his hat to the footman and hurried up the stairs as if he were part of the family. Carstairs had lax control over his household, but that was not a problem Pascoe had been sent here to fix. He needed to resolve the mine and foundry’s labor problems and return to the sanity of London with the twins, where he might think straight again.

Carstairs was sitting up in his bed, wearing a silk banyan over his shirt, while a slim, gray-haired gentleman examined his unwrapped

head.

Another gentleman in riding attire leaned against the mantel, watching.

“Rainsford!” Pascoe spoke quietly, so as not to disturb the duke and his patient. He crossed to greet the duke’s son, the marquess of Rainsford. “I doubt Lady Carstairs expected a full contingent of physicians to help.”

The blond marquess shrugged his tailored shoulders. “I’m more interested in Lady Carstairs than the earl’s empty head,” he murmured. “Where is she?”

Only Pascoe’s years of diplomatic experience helped him stifle a spike of sheer jealousy. “At her brother’s house. Explanations later.” He nodded at the bed where the duke and patient were conversing to indicate they might be overheard.

“I don’t know Carstairs well,” Rainsford said, watching the examination. “Just enough to hope the blow knocked some sense into his head. I can’t blame Bridey for abandoning him.”

Pascoe winced at the intimacy of the wealthy aristocrat using her given name. He should have known Rainsford would be familiar with the countess—they shared a similar interest in medicine and had lived within riding distance. They would have had numerous chances to meet over the years. If Rainsford was finally looking for a bride. . . Pascoe clenched his molars until he could speak with detachment.

“She didn’t abandon him. She has been helping as much as she can.” Pascoe defended Bridey without thought. She deserved recognition for her efforts. He preferred to divert the marquess down other paths. “But we also hoped to have a private discussion with His Grace over more delicate matters.”

“That’s what we thought, and why I came.” Rainsford straightened to attention as the duke began packing his medical bag. “Carstairs, have you a private salon where my father can rest and take tea before we ride back?”

The duke shot him a disgruntled look, but noticing Pascoe, nodded a greeting. “Good to see you, Ives. A sip of good whiskey wouldn’t be amiss while the earl dresses.”

His Grace was one of the few people who got away with calling him by his father’s name. Pascoe didn’t mind the acknowledgment that he’d fallen from an aristocratic tree, but he preferred the bluntness of his illegitimate status. “I’ll show you a private salon down the corridor. Carstairs, I trust you are recovering well?”

“The duke has healing hands,” Carstairs said with relief and not his usual petulance. He rubbed the shorn hair at the back of his head. “The ache has gone. I’ll have the cook send up a luncheon and join you shortly. I’m feeling peckish.”

Pascoe tried not to put much into the patient's claim that a laying on of hands had cured his headache. He'd heard that sort of thing about the duke, but some people would believe anything. What worried him was that neither the duke nor the marquess argued with the claim. If even His Grace and his sensible heir believed in the weird. . .

Pascoe sighed. They'd fit right in here and would understand his dilemma.

"Eat lightly for another day or two," the duke warned. "Don't overdo anything. You might wish to send your guests home and relax for a fortnight or so."

"They're my friends," Carstairs argued, returning to peevishness. "If they go, I'll be abandoned here alone with the ghosts."

Rainsford snickered as he opened the chamber door for his father. "Save us from the ghosts," he said solemnly.

Oh well, count the marquess out as a help.

Once in the privacy of the salon to which Pascoe led them, the elderly duke demanded, "Where's Bridey? I need to speak with that young lady."

"I'll send for her, if you request," Pascoe said, "But this house isn't safe. There are more problems here than Carstairs' encounter with a swinging ax."

"I didn't ride all the way up here to look at that young pup." The duke settled into the room's most comfortable chair. "She should be safe enough in company. Send for her."

Pascoe was accustomed to being ordered about by the king and his cabinet. He didn't analyze his resentment now. "I'll let her know you're here," he said stiffly, stepping out to summon the footman guarding the earl's chamber.

"Now what is this of falling axes and ghosts?" the duke demanded as servants delivered whiskey and brandy. "Old George didn't have much in his skull, but he never mentioned ghosts."

Pascoe explained the situation, from the king's summons to Bridey's discovery of the dangerous gallery, while trays of food arrived from the kitchen. Rainsford planted himself by the tall windows overlooking the front drive, sipping tea instead of whiskey, peeling at an apple rather than partaking of thick slabs of beef and cheese. Pascoe had known the marquess was considered a man of refined taste and monkish habits, but Pascoe's instinct said Rainsford concealed more than he revealed.

Bridey deserved a man of passion, not this austere, exotic praying mantis.

Pascoe did not mention Jack, not without proof that the boy was the legitimate offspring of Jonathan Darrow.

“From what you’re saying, it sounds as if Oscar Darrow may be a thief,” the duke said, pulling out a cigar and snipping the end. “Do you have enough evidence to convict him?”

“If there is embezzlement, I expect to have confirmation in another day or so. But Carstairs is the magistrate. He’s not likely to convict his brother. He might be convinced to remove him from the steward’s position, if I can explain what he’s done clearly enough.” Pascoe wished for whiskey and a cigar, too, but he needed to keep his head clear to state his case for the powerful aristocrats whose support he required when he reported to the king.

“We can go over what you find, back you up,” Rainsford said unexpectedly, pushing away from the window. “Bridey just arrived. I’ll escort her up.”

After the marquess closed the door, Pascoe poured a whiskey and threw it back.

The duke laughed. “I’ve ordered the pup to produce an heir or be cut off. He doesn’t want his routine disturbed, so he’s chasing after the closest prey. Bridey has set him in his place before. Perhaps she’ll be more amenable this time.”

“She wants some sort of hospital or medical school for women,” Pascoe offered. He wanted to feel gallant for sacrificing his own needs to Bridey’s, but he suspected he was trying to sever the vision of a fiery naked goddess he couldn’t have from his head. He might as well cut out his eyes. “If he’s willing to offer that, she might be persuaded.”

The duke waved his cigar. “I know how well she’s been taught, so I’ve already offered my support. But there are men who will declare she’s practicing surgery without a license if she uses forceps for deliveries, which she will. She’ll need powerful protection against the fools. The gal has a good head on her shoulders and a gift that should be shared. Not many men will appreciate that.” He studied Pascoe shrewdly.

“You are a generous and understanding man,” Pascoe said stiffly. “She’ll be grateful.”

“But you won’t,” the duke said astutely. “You’re a man of many depths, and you’re hiding something.”

“Aren’t we all?” Pascoe helped himself to cheese and pretended it didn’t taste like sawdust as he heard Bridey approaching, chattering familiarly with Rainsford.

She must have heard of the duke’s arrival and already been on her way over.

She swept in, wearing a colorful gown of apricot and yellow, with a cheerful hat of feathers and ribbons. Pascoe almost choked on the dry cheese as she cast a wide smile and performed a curtsy fit for a king. Where was the frost queen?

“Your Grace, I’m so glad you came!” She pressed a kiss to the duke’s wrinkled cheek. “And bringing Rainsford with you is such an honor! I hope they’ve treated you well.” She glanced approvingly at the tea tray as she removed her gloves. “The servants have been at sixes and sevens lately, but I see they haven’t forgotten everything I taught them.”

She settled into the chair Pascoe held for her. “What is your assessment of Carstairs’ injury?” she asked without further preface.

“Unfortunately or not, he’ll live,” the duke said. “From what your friend here tells us, the question seems to be whether he can be kept alive.”

“We have recommended that Carstairs return to the city, but he refuses,” she said.

Pascoe took a chair near her, and Bridey nodded as if they were mere acquaintances.

She continued speaking as if he were not there. “Mr. Pascoe has sent Darrow to London. If the dangerous incidents cease. . .”

“Not your responsibility, my girl,” the duke reminded her, as Pascoe had before.

“The village. . .” she started to argue, then finally cast Pascoe a guilty glance and sighed. “I’m sorry. I cannot completely shake the responsibility for those weaker than myself. Grandda would turn in his grave.”

“Blair was a good man, a man of his times. The world is different now, and his vision was limited by the past. If the village doesn’t thrive, people can move away, as they couldn’t before. Perhaps it is better if they do,” the duke said. “What you can offer the future is more important. If you really mean that you’re willing to teach women what you know, I’m holding to my offer to support you.”

Pascoe watched Bridey beam with delight—so very different from the frost queen he’d first encountered. This was the woman she was meant to be—the woman he couldn’t have, an independent, courageous woman with powerful supporters and a destiny that didn’t mesh with his.

“I’ll not tell His Majesty that you’re planning on overthrowing the medical profession or he’s likely to shoot the messenger,” Pascoe said dryly. “He just wants to hear that we have the mine open and the blast furnaces in operation again.”

Carstairs chose that moment to burst into the salon, nearly running after having been told not to exert himself. “The miners are rioting! They’ve burned the office! We need soldiers, at once, dammit!”

CHAPTER 24

INSTEAD OF SUCCUMBING to the earl's foolish panic, Bridey glared. "Offer the men fair wages and hours, and they'll happily return to work. All you need to do is talk to them."

"I can't! That's what Oscar does, and he's not *here!*" her nemesis wailed. "I have no notion what to say or even how much they're paid."

Looking as self-possessed and assured as the nobleman he should be, Pascoe shoved out of his chair with a grunt of annoyance. Pushing back his tailed coat to remove his watch from his pocket, he glanced at it, then leaned over to glare into the young earl's face, forcing him to stop pacing. "You *ought* to know. Send for Fin Finley. He can tell you."

"But Oscar says we don't have the blunt to pay more. That's why he's been hiring the Irishmen, because the locals are too greedy." Underneath his bandage, Carstairs turned pale like a nervous boy. "I need to send Belinda back to the city if they're burning down the town. This whole week has gone all wrong!"

Bridey practiced restraint by sipping her tea instead of offering to fix what was wrong. Let him stew in the bumble broth he'd brewed.

"You have the blunt. Oscar has hidden it for some reason." With an air of command that he wielded well, Pascoe pounded the stripling on his shoulder, pushing him toward the doorway. He glanced over his shoulder. "Bridey, if you would, please, take the twins back to Wystan. His Grace and Rainsford can escort you. Riots are dangerous."

Mutiny filled her heart at being relegated to the sidelines, while Pascoe, a complete stranger to the village, took the place she'd once held. Still, this had been what she'd wanted—a severance from all responsibility to what was no longer hers.

The duke and his son were already standing up, preparing to depart, as if Pascoe had every right to order their departure.

As the king's man, he most likely did. *This* was why he was here. Because he had experience in these matters, and command of the situation as she did not. She not only had no experience, but no right, no influence, and no power to interfere. Wystan was now her home. So be it.

She followed the duke and his son down the stairs, leaving Pascoe giving orders to servants as if he were a general. At the bottom of the

stairs, she heard the excited, terrified arguments of the guests gathered in the main salon, apparently already informed of the mayhem. Standing in the foyer, she could smell smoke seeping through open windows. Were they truly burning the entire *village*?

It horrified her to think so. She touched Rainsford's arm, forcing him to look down at her. "Will you order Pascoe's carriage brought around? I'll need it for the twins. I should speak with Lady Belinda and her mother. They're the best ones to direct departures."

His long, narrow face expressed its concern as he squeezed her hands. "Quickly, please. Tempers can explode when there is no one in charge to tell people what to do."

She nodded, lifted her skirts, and hurried into the salon. Guests turned to her in relief, looking for information. She shook her head and gestured to Lady Neville. "Come with me a moment, if you please. I need to leave, but I'd have a word with you and Lady Belinda first."

She was meddling. She had already told herself all the reasons she shouldn't interfere, except it seemed that was what she did. As the two women followed her into Carstairs' study, she hastily scanned their auras again. They still harbored guilt, but the rest of their colors were innocuous.

"I must leave for my own home," she told them once the door closed. "Carstairs has asked that you return to the city for now. It's too dangerous until they have the mine situation under control, and he doesn't know when that will be."

Lady Neville nodded in concern. "If all the guests leave at once, we should be safe enough."

Lady Belinda twisted her hands together. "If he needs me, I should stay. He's still weak from his injury."

Bridey held up her hand to prevent Lady Neville from protesting. "I approve of your courage, and I can see that you honestly care, but Carstairs has good people at his back who can deal with the miners. What I need to know from you is why you're really hesitating over announcing the betrothal. I know this is seemingly none of my concern, but there are things I know and can't share yet, and it would be good to know that Carstairs has you on his side. *He* needs to know that."

The two women exchanged anguished glances. Lady Belinda gave in first, holding up her chin and meeting Bridey's eyes. "My father has rejected Carstairs' proposal. He says the earl has squandered his wealth and only wants me for my dowry. I am not even supposed to be here."

Lady Neville wiped her eyes with her handkerchief. "I want my daughter to be happy. I had hoped one of the other gentlemen might interest her, or that she would see that Carstairs is a poor choice and

develop a disgust for his wasteful ways. But nothing we've seen has shown that the earl is *bad*."

Bridey had to quell her prejudice against George's heir and see Carstairs through the eyes of these women. He would not be her choice, but she could see that the new earl was no worse than most spoiled young men of his age and more handsome and better-mannered than many—and his wife would be a countess with a great deal of power.

Still, having no evidence that Oscar was a thief, she had no right to either reassure or put them off. She could only give them fact. "I have never seen or heard of the earl gambling, and my husband would have told me if he was given to dissolute behavior. He may be young, but no, he is not bad."

"That is what I told Papa," Lady Belinda exclaimed. "And Carstairs is new to the title and estate. He will learn over time."

Probably not, but Bridey didn't wish to disillusion the girl with her own bias. "Then ask yourself this—would you still love him if he did not have a title and wealth? Do you trust him enough to believe he can straighten out the difficulties that your father incorrectly perceives? It works both ways. And now, we must all go. I hope we shall meet again at a happier time."

She curtsied her farewell and hurried back to the corridor where Rainsford waited impatiently.

"You always were an impossibly independent creature," the marquess said, holding out his arm for her to take. "Armies could be burning a path of destruction, and you would stop to tend your flock."

"And you would not?" she asked archly. "Goose and gander, please."

Outside, the smoke was even stronger. Bridey cast a glance to the gray sky where a black pall lingered over the horizon. "They're burning the fields, not the town. Were George not already dead, he would have an attack of the heart right now."

Rainsford handed her into the waiting carriage. "I'll never understand why you chose to marry that fool, but I won't see you throw yourself away on another."

"That is presumptuous of you, my lord," Bridey said, fighting anger and fear on too many levels to be tactful. "I do not consider those years wasted."

And she didn't, she realized. She'd put Fin through school, healed the sick, delivered healthy babes to healthy mothers, and persuaded George to build the foundry and put productive business practices in place, which had enriched the entire community.

She might have no children and no home, but she hadn't wasted her time. In the eyes of most men, though, her lack of children and

home made her a failure.

Ignoring her comment, Rainsford asked, "These children we are saving, they are at your brother's house?"

"They are. We'll only slow you down. Why don't you and His Grace go on without us? I don't believe we are in any real danger from men I've known all my life." Men who now called her witch, but she needn't reveal that fact.

"You're just trying to be rid of us so you can do as you please," he said, knowing her well. "My father would lop off my head should I be so careless. He and his man are already on the way to tell your servants to pack. I'll escort the carriage."

She saw no purpose in arguing. She *wanted* to return to Wistan, to where people appreciated her. She wanted the children to be safe. She had every reason in the world to do as told—except she couldn't bear leaving Pascoe behind.

That lingering unease made no sense. Pascoe was far more competent than she at handling rioters and lack-wit earls. The rioters weren't likely to lash out at him—*except one had*. Everyone kept forgetting that he'd been attacked—because Pascoe didn't allow his injury to show.

Someone had dared shoot at the king's man, even when he wasn't dressed as a courtier. Why?

The *Darrows* had sent to the king for aid, so they would have known help was on the way.

As the king's godsons, they could expect an army to descend if they reported that His Majesty's envoy had been harmed. Or if Pascoe had been a mere stranger, they could have blamed the striking laborers for his death and had more cause to demand an army.

Oscar Darrow hadn't written to His Majesty for a mere envoy—he *wanted* an army to teach the laborers a lesson.

By the time they reached Fin's house, her stomach had twisted into a tight knot of fear. She knew what she should do, but it warred with what her *instincts* told her to do. She packed up the children and their kitten, the nursemaid, her lady's maid, did everything the way she should, as she'd always done.

But when it came time to leave, she couldn't. That place inside her that warned she was needed here wouldn't let her go, despite the hundred arguments she could present to the contrary. Even the disapproval of the handsome marquess and his father couldn't convince her. She took her valise away from the men loading the carriage.

"I've sent Theo a message," she told them. "He should meet you, along with his men, about midway. Then you can ride on and leave the carriage with him."

The duke mounted impatiently. "Then climb in, gal, and let's leave while there's light."

"I'm sorry, your grace, I'm not going." She prayed she wasn't throwing away his good will for a *feeling* as frail as a frantic ghost or a shady aura. "People may be injured fighting the fires. I cannot leave yet. I'll be fine. I have my horse and can ride after you if I see I'm not needed. I thank you for offering to escort the carriage, and I will write you about the midwife's school when all is settled."

The duke frowned, but looked to his son to reply.

Rainsford swore and started to dismount. Bridey daringly touched his knee. "Don't, Rain. Your duty is to your father, and you know it. Go before the children cry."

She could already see their little faces popping up in the windows as the stable hand put up the steps and closed the door without her. It tore at her heart to see them go, which meant she had to turn her back and walk away.



PASCOE READ the pigeon message from the Carstairs' estate solicitor—ex-solicitor, apparently. While Fin and the earl argued over how and when to meet the leaders of the rioting miners, Pascoe scanned the missive. The solicitor was in high dudgeon and threatening to ride to Northbridge if there was a "man of sense" about to hear his case.

Pascoe whistled silently, employed his monocle, and rapped his stick on the desk for attention. Fin glared, but Carstairs looked relieved to be diverted from an argument he didn't fully comprehend.

"You won't like this any better, old fellow," Pascoe said, using his most avuncular tone and handing over the message. "Your brother has removed all the estate funds from your solicitor's control. Myers claims your signature and seal were on the letter of instructions. The funds and investments have been placed with a London firm in Darrow's name. You are now officially penniless, although Myers is willing to sue for their return at your request."

The earl turned even more pale as he read the message. "I do not understand. Oscar said he wished to invest the funds at a better rate, so of course I signed the papers. How does this leave me penniless?"

"Because the papers didn't specify the funds were to be invested in the estate name. It's not as if the investments were entailed in any way. You are free to give them to charity, if you so choose. You still own the land and mines, though, for the moment," Pascoe said, hiding his wrath beneath a reassuring tone so the boy wouldn't panic. "The land is entailed, of course, but the mine and foundry aren't. You can always mortgage them. Or sue your brother for malfeasance of duty,

embezzlement, and assorted other charges and demand the return of your funds.”

“Sue Oscar?” Carstairs stared at the message as if the words might change if he held it long enough. “He’s the one who manages everything. I’ve never had the mind for it.”

Pascoe caught Fin’s wry look and shook his head to keep him silent. Bridey’s brother was younger than the earl, but Fin had a sound head on his shoulders. Carstairs apparently lacked that trait. At least the earl knew it, so there might be hope yet.

“You don’t have to have a mind for numbers,” Pascoe said, putting a agreeable face on the subject. “An earl learns to put responsibility in the hands of loyal, trustworthy people who are capable of their tasks. Finley here knows the miners and the foundry laborers. He lives here and it’s in his best interests to put the mine and foundry into production. Let him talk to the laborers, reassure them that they will have employment and wages soon. Your uncle trusted Myers with his funds. Since the late earl left you a sizable fortune, we must assume Myers is good at what he does. You should be able to trust him too. You need to write and tell him to institute proceedings to return your funds to the estate.”

Looking defeated and unhappy, Carstairs nodded. “This being an earl is complicated. I cannot marry Belinda if I am bankrupt,” he murmured.

If that was what it took to keep the earl moving in the right direction, then Pascoe wouldn’t dash his hopes. “Your uncle should have taught you more,” he said sympathetically. Then he pointed Fin at the door. “Do whatever you need to do to speak with the ringleaders. The whole damned town will go hungry this winter if they burn any more fields.”

Fin returned a brief salute, and with a scent of triumph, left the study. Pascoe assumed Bridey’s brother had instigated most of the unrest, but he would leave that out of his report. Men needed leaders, and young Finley was all they had—provided he hadn’t been shooting at Oscar and dropping axes on the earl. Only time would tell that. Fin would turn the mines and foundry around, once the earl had funds again.

Pascoe called for a writing desk and ordered a groom ready to ride to London. Once Oscar reached town, Pascoe could have him apprehended and held for theft based on the estate books—if Darrow did not take ship and sail instead of going to the king.

There was still the matter of discovering if young Jack was legitimate—a headache of major proportions that would carry all the way to Parliament if they pursued it.

Would he ever have time to go after Bridey and his children?

How did men work with that sort of distraction?

"You should probably say farewell to your guests," Pascoe suggested, gesturing at the carriages being loaded on the drive below, wishing he was climbing into one.

"Should I ride with them to ensure their safety?" Carstairs asked anxiously.

There was a good excuse for Pascoe to escape nursemaid duties, but then nothing would get done here, and the king would have his head. Until the foundry was back on its way to operation and he was certain no one was trying to kill Carstairs, his task wasn't complete.

"His Grace would advise against it," Pascoe said, kicking himself as he did so. "If you pass out and fall from your horse, it will do your skull no favors. Perhaps order stable hands to ride with them to the toll road."

Pascoe felt a million years old as the earl took his advice and eagerly ran to share a tender farewell with his beloved. He stood at the window and watched all the guests escape a house haunted by misfortune.

He could look forward to a future of straightening out increasingly younger heirs or industrial magnates or... shudder to think... younger criminals like Oscar Darrow. He would have to be satisfied watching others succeed on the basis of his advice and aid.

With enough good fortune, he might someday gain the favors he wanted from the king, although not if he had his godson arrested.

Or the king—who was already old and ill—could drop dead tomorrow, and he could be out of employment entirely. He'd hoped for a knighthood for aiding his country. Was playing nursemaid to lack-wits enough to make up for years of his life?

Before he could consider the answer to that, or even question this new dissatisfaction, he caught a glimpse out the window of a familiar grubby figure dashing into the shrubbery near the side of the house.

He'd forgotten to assign young Jack a task to keep him occupied. Or he'd hoped Fin would find a use for him. Pascoe considered sending a servant to collar the boy, but he needed to work off his restlessness. He wasn't old enough to settle before a good fire with his cigar while others dealt with a volatile situation. He needed action.

He descended the back stairs and took a side door to avoid Carstairs and his guests on the drive. Once outside, Pascoe stalked back to the hedge and whacked the greenery with his stick as he once had not too long ago—before Bridey and getting shot and the twins talking. It had been a rather eventful week. No wonder he was considering his mortality.

No rabbits leapt from the bushes, but Pascoe caught a flash of white and reached to snag the boy's shirt. "Do you have a death

wish?" he snarled in irritation. "Couldn't you stay where you'd be fed and safe?"

Jack pushed through a hole in the hedge, obviously having taken this route before. He brushed off dead leaves and Pascoe's hand. "It's Lady Carstairs," he explained, trying not to sound afraid. "She didn't leave with the others."

Pascoe refrained from rolling his eyes. "Of course she didn't. She did send the children on their way though, didn't she?"

The boy nodded. "She told Mrs. Mac that she thought you were in danger, and she was going to ride back here, but then one of the ladies from the village came to ask for help."

"So you thought you'd take it upon yourself to warn me, in her stead?" Pascoe wanted to be amused. He'd learned how to take care of himself from an early age. He couldn't remember the last time someone had thought to look after him, especially not a female or a scrap of a boy.

But his sense of unease escalated. Bridey shouldn't be out there alone. Without giving it conscious thought, he started down the hill toward the village. The green square below was dotted with scattered gossiping figures, many of them casting worried glances to the smoke on the horizon. Anxiety stank in the air.

"Lady Carstairs told me to come," The boy admitted, trotting to keep up. "She saw me following her, and she told me to warn you that she thought she saw Mr. Darrow's aura near the foundry. She said if you were dead, the king would have to send an army. What does that mean?"

Pascoe's blood curdled. "Everyone believes Darrow has gone to London."

"Yes, sir," the boy said obediently. "What is an aura?"

Pascoe didn't dare say *a figment of the lady's imagination*, because it made too much sense. If he was shot, and Carstairs blamed the miners, the king would definitely send soldiers and start hanging rioters.

An army occupying this normally peaceful rural valley would generate worse riots and violence. Soldiers reacted badly to boys throwing stones. Once bullets flew—*Carstairs could die by any number of violent means*. And Darrow would claim he was a hundred miles away. Would Oscar engage in fratricide after all these years? Possibly, if he had any inkling that his thievery had been uncovered. Pascoe's apprehension escalated.

"Lady Carstairs sees colors in people," he explained absently while continuing straight for the village.

Beyond that innocent gathering of folks on the green loomed the blackened walls of the burned-out foundry and the overcrowded

tenements containing unemployed foundry laborers. Bridey was out there somewhere. And Darrow might be also.

"Is that how you saw me?" Jack asked, no longer showing an ounce of fear. "You see my colors?"

"I can smell you," Pascoe said in disgust. "You need to ask Mrs. Mac for a bath tub. But first ask her to send word to Fin to have someone search the foundry. Tell him to be careful, the murderer may be hiding there."

"I know where he's at." The boy raced off down the hill at a breakneck pace, throwing up stones and dust in his wake.

Pascoe was forced to maintain a dignified stride. His career depended on his unflappable demeanor and perfect decorum.

He wanted guns and swords and an army.

A woman's scream echoed up from the valley.

Forgetting decorum, Pascoe bolted down the hill until he outpaced Jack.

CHAPTER 25

SCREAMING HER FURY, Bridey flung the basin of bloody water at the towering thug threatening her—and her helpless patient.

Instead of dousing the drunken Irishman's rage, the soaking only escalated his curses. "Witch! You'll leave my wife be or *I'll set fire to all you besoms.*" He shoved tongs into the hearth and brandished a flaming coal.

"You would treat an old cow better than you've treated this poor woman," Bridey retorted, arming herself with a poker, and gesturing at the unconscious woman in the bed. No one had called her until after his wife had been laboring for three days. The woman was now barely clinging to life—and this animal had just returned from weeping in his ale at the pub.

When the sot stepped menacingly toward her, Bridey smacked the iron tongs with the poker, sending the coal flying across the room where one of the women assisting her stomped out the flame.

The miner roared his drunken rage and ripped the poker from her hand, casting both implements aside and raising his fists. His wife's sister grabbed the iron instruments and hid them in her skirts.

He might be drunk and staggering, but he was still larger than Bridey. Driven by fury more than fear, she dived into her bag for another weapon.

From experience at snatching instruments from her bag, she located a sharp pair of pointed scissors. The other women in the room gasped and cringed as she waved her weapon.

She no longer had to care about her place in society or word getting back to the earl. She exulted in the power and freedom this gave her. He could call her witch, bitch, or besom, but she would not let another mother and child die from ignorance.

"Leave us be or I'll run this through your eye, and then while you're weeping, I'll cut off that dangly bit between your legs and make mincemeat of it." Fueled by fury she'd stifled for years, Bridey didn't wait for the giant to swing. She brandished the scissors above her head, ready to slam them into any part of him daring to approach her.

The bully flinched at her threat but snatched up a rickety wooden chair to hold her off. "I'll have the lot of ye burned! *Out*, be gone with ye and leave my Peg alone. I'll not be raising no divil cursed by a

witch.”

“You’re the only devil in here!” With her unencumbered hand, Bridey grabbed the bottom rung of the chair, meaning to yank the chair from his grip. The rung she’d seized broke off in her hand. Instead of being shocked that the chair had fallen apart so easily, she wielded her new weapon like a club. “Out!” She smacked his fist with the stick, beating him while he tried to fend her off with his sawdust shield. “Out, you dunderhead! I can save your wife and child, if you’ll just let me be.”

“You can’t save her! No one can save us. And isn’t it *your* curse that closed the mine so we all go hungry,” he roared back.

“If you have the coin for a mug, you have the coin to buy your wife beans for soup! My curse is for men who leave their wives *dying* while they weep in their damned beer.” Bridey smacked him again, then jabbed with the scissors, although she couldn’t reach past the chair. She needed to drive him back so she could slam the door and lock it.

“If I get my hands on ye, I’ll stuff ye up the boiler, and we’ll all be better for it,” he roared.

He was twice her size, but when he lunged, Bridey didn’t cringe. She sidestepped the chair, rammed her wooden stick at his kidney, then slammed the scissors into his massive shoulder. He howled and bent in half with pain.

His roars woke his wife. She groaned and whimpered, but she was too weak for more, which infuriated Bridey’s temper beyond boiling.

With the giant leaning over howling, she could reach his hard skull. She slammed the rung against his head and shoved him backward at the doorway. He barely staggered from the blow. She raised the stick again, until a dry drawl drained her rage.

“You’ll just break a perfectly good piece of kindling.” Pascoe reached in to grab her victim’s shirt. As if the Irishman were no more weight than a chair, he tossed him into the front room. “I’ll guard the door. You do what you must do.”

He slammed the panel shut. From the other side, Bridey heard her hero say, “I’ll stick you like a pig if you dare crumple my linen.”

He had a *sword* inside that effeminate stick, she remembered. Taking a deep breath, letting her pulse calm to almost normal, Bridey returned to her terrified patient and equally frightened attendants.

“I am not a witch,” she announced, washing her hands again. “I am a trained physician,” she declared for the first time in her life. “If the fact that I am female makes me a witch, consider yourselves my coven. Heat that water so I can clean my instruments. And take those soiled cloths away from her and boil them.”

She discarded her riding jacket and pulled a clean apron from her

bag to cover her shirt and skirt. "Daisy, hold Peg's hand. She'll pass out soon enough, but give her what comfort you can."

The women she'd known since childhood warily did as told.

With the freedom of no longer caring what they thought, Bridey went to work saving mother and child.



THE IRISHMAN WAS PASSED out drunk and snoring so hard, Pascoe barely heard the weak wail of an infant. Wearily, he sat back in the room's one remaining chair and wished for a drink, but the bottle was empty. Not that he wanted rotgut anyway.

He could hear Bridey spitting curt commands. Weren't women supposed to coo and cuddle infants, not shout orders? The Frost Queen was all icy edges as she apparently fought to save the mother.

But the lovely woman who had shared his bed wasn't cold or hard. That woman was all squeezable softness, sighs, laughter, and passion. The icy exterior was her defensive shell to hide the creamy filling.

He bit back a laugh recalling the scene he'd encountered upon entering. Bridey had looked like a fiery Juno unleashing her wrath upon the sinners of the world, while wearing silk and lace and wielding a broken chair leg.

By damn, he was going to miss her.

By the time Bridey emerged from the bedroom, removing her apron to reveal her shirt, she no longer looked a countess or a goddess but just a tired woman who needed to be held and pampered. She'd probably cut off his *dangly bits* if he tried.

"Come along, my warrior queen, let us take you back to the palace to put your feet up. Your brother is quelling the rebels, drizzle is dampening the fire, the guests are gone, and we will avoid evil auras lurking in the foundry until it can be searched properly."

She wiped her forehead with the back of her shirt sleeve. Did she have any notion how tempting she looked in dishabille? Pascoe felt like a pervert watching the rise of her breasts beneath the worn linen.

"If Darrow is in there, one can hope a charred beam falls on his head and he rots in hell." She set her bag down to pull on her riding coat.

A gentleman to the bone, Pascoe helped to cover up the treasure he'd just admired. "That is how you earn a reputation as a witch who curses people. If Fin's men find Oscar buried under a timber tomorrow, it's all your fault."

She didn't even smile, and he regretted his weak attempt at witticism. He hugged her, just a little. "It takes strength to rebel

against narrow-mindedness, Bridey, and you're exhausted. Tomorrow, you'll stand up and fight again. For now, let's find food and drink."

She did smile at that. "Since I never seem to learn, I suppose you're right. How did you find me?"

"Young Jack is an enterprising lad. His mother must have been a strong woman, one with more intelligence than the average Carstairs, if we're correct about his parentage."

This time, she chuckled. Despite the gloom of the small cottage, the sun was still shining as they emerged into the dusty street. Jack had evidently hung around to keep an eye on them. He left the scramble of boys kicking a rock to join them.

"I told Mrs. Mac what you said about the foundry, but Mr. Fin's still fighting the fire and can't come down. But a rider just galloped toward the manor," he offered. "Should I see who it was? I can have them send a cart for you."

"Fin's house is closer, and I left my clothes there, but thank you, Jack. You should come with me. Fin has clothes in the attic that might fit you."

Pascoe hid his scowl. The woman collected chickens like a mother hen. He wanted her to himself another night. In the morning, he needed to decide whether to follow his children or continue with his task here. Either way, Bridey would be out of his reach. "Go see who the rider is," he told the boy. "I'll escort the lady home."

Jack saluted and dashed off.

"Once upon a time, I had that kind of vigor," Pascoe said, taking Bridey's arm.

"You still do. You just exploit it more wisely. That drunk had to weigh a ton. How ever did you fling him like that?"

Pascoe hoped that was admiration and not disgust he heard at his schoolboy antics. "Leverage. And I kicked his knee out from under him. Works like a charm."

She laughed again and walked more briskly. A few people came out to stare as they passed. More whispered to each other in doorways and gardens, glancing to the dying smoke beyond the manor. Apparently determined to forget them all, Bridey talked of the herbs she needed to gather and send to the new mother.

They had crossed the village square and were halfway down the lane to Fin's house when they heard horses galloping recklessly down the main street and stopped to watch.

"That's Jack with our horses," Bridey said worriedly.

Pascoe bit back a curse. Fate did not mean for him to have this female to himself ever again. When she hurried toward the riders, he followed reluctantly.

"The carriage broke a wheel and slid off the road," Jack called.

He slid out of the saddle of Pascoe's horse.

A frisson of alarm crept down his spine. "The children? The servants? They're all right?"

"The duke's man said the nursemaid injured an arm." Jack looked worried.

The groom on Bridey's horse finished his tale. "While the duke was tending her, the children walked off. We're gathering a search party. It's a few hours before dark. They can't go far."

With truly frightening silence, Bridey took the reins of her horse. Using a low rock wall as a step, she hauled herself into the sidesaddle.

She had to be hungry and exhausted. Pascoe wanted to fling her over his shoulder and proceed directly to the house with her. Except he couldn't, not when his children were in trouble.

If he'd learned nothing else this week, it was that arguing with the frost queen was futile, and he didn't have time to waste. He mounted his gelding and held the restive animal steady, hoping he didn't reveal any of the overwhelming terror freezing his innards. "Jack, fetch the dogs and help gather a search party. I'm sure we'll find the brats soon, but we'll find them faster with help."

He wished he believed his own words, but he knew too much of the dangers for babes in the woods. What if he'd waited too late to be a father to them?

Bridey was already galloping down the road the carriage had taken before Pascoe had finished speaking. Heart in throat, he kned his horse and raced after her. He'd never really learned to pray, but he sent fervent pleas to the firmament now.

Pascoe tried to calculate the time that had passed since the carriage had departed, the speed at which it would have traveled the rutted country road, and how far they could have driven, but it was an impossible task. There'd been time enough for them to reach Wystan if they'd been traveling at a brisk pace. Theo should be with them by now. Perhaps they'd already found the twins picking wildflowers or petting hedgehogs.

He lost any shred of optimism once they reached the rugged terrain where the carriage sagged half off the road. The steep hills and dales were dotted with thick patches of gorse and boulders big enough to hide cattle. A heavy black cloud was looming over the crag, threatening a summer storm before night fell.

The carriage driver had the team unharnessed and looked up in relief at their arrival. "The others are out hunting the young 'uns. His Grace said as I'm to take the maids to Wystan, if that be all right with you."

Bridey didn't wait for Pascoe to hand her down but slid off on her own. He could tell nothing of how she felt from her frozen

countenance. She examined the sling fashioned around the young nursemaid's injured arm, listened unsmilingly to her personal maid's frightened scolding, and directed the driver to help both servants onto the broad backs of the unharnessed horses.

"Which way are they searching?" Pascoe asked the driver while the young maid tearfully nattered her sorry tale of how she'd lost his children. It seemed to involve the blasted kitten the lady's maid had wrapped in a shawl.

"His Grace and his son went that way, hoping the children might follow the road." The driver pointed down the lane toward Wystan. "Lord Theo and his man rode off to the east 'cause it's a short cut to the tower. The lad was to keep an eye out for them on the ride back the way you just came in."

"And out there?" Pascoe gestured at the boulders and valleys to the west. The carriage door faced that direction. The brats would have slid right down the hill and behind the first patch of gorse they found—and disappeared like fairies into a mound. They'd probably rolled down the hill, giggling.

They didn't do it because they were running away. They did it because it was *fun*. And they were four and thoughtless.

The driver shook his head sadly. "I been stomping around there a bit and there's nary a sign."

This time, Pascoe was quick enough to help Bridey back into her saddle. "West?" he murmured, following instinct as well as logic.

"Fin will bring his men from the north," she agreed obliquely. "They'll take both sides of the road. This is the terrain hardest to search."

He nodded agreement, signaled the driver to depart with the weeping, chattering maids on horseback, and remounted.

"How long can they survive out there?" he asked, wishing he could hide his anxiety. "Is it prone to marshes? Are there overhangs if there's lightning?"

"Your children have a guardian angel," she reminded him, guiding her horse cautiously down the hillside. "But this is beyond erratic behavior if she's responsible for their flight."

"It's just what they do," he said irritably. "And it's becoming worse as they grow older."

"I don't know how to exorcise your late wife." Her tone was cold. "But it's apparent to me, even if it's not to you, that Emma listens to a voice we can't hear, and Edward obediently follows, if only to keep her company."

"I have to separate them, if we find them," he said gloomily. "It seems cruel. They've lost their mother. I can't be with them all the time. To remove the only friend and family they have. . ."

“Or you take them with you. Your choices aren’t good,” she agreed, scanning the valley they approached. “Perhaps it’s as simple as taking Emma’s hands and praying the spirit will leave her. I don’t think she’s aware enough yet to do it on her own.”

Pascoe felt the first drops of rain as the clouds drifted closer. “I don’t suppose you can open your mind and invite the spirit and have a talk with her.”

Bridey arched her lovely eyebrows at him. “If you are not jesting, there may be hope for you yet.”

Scanning the rocky hills, unable to see anything that resembled human life, Pascoe shivered. “I do not jest at times like this. I feel as if my heart is being carved from my chest with a dull knife.”

She sent him a look full of pity and sympathy, but the hill was too steep for more. Pascoe swore he’d never look at another woman again if only he could find the twins unharmed. What were the chances? They were babes in a wilderness!

“What kind of wild animals might they encounter?” He couldn’t tolerate the inside of his screaming brain right now. He needed these fears in the open air.

“Fox, sheep, goats. . . It’s the cold we need to fear. The temperature is dropping.” She began calling “Emma, Edward! We’re here, come out, come out, wherever you are!”

She made the search sound like a child’s game. Pascoe swallowed the very large lump in his throat and tried to make himself do the same, but he would only produce howls of anguish or roars of fury if he tried.

They separated enough to be able to see each other and the ground in between. The terrain was rough, the gorse threatened his horse’s ankles, and by the time they reached the bottom, the mud was thick. Even he, in his city obliviousness, knew if it rained, the run-off from the hills would flood through like a river.

“If we ride through this vale, it will take us north until we reach the bluff,” Bridey said grimly, riding along the marshy ground to catch up with him.

“How long before Fin’s search party will reach this far south?” Clenching his molars, he glanced at the sun sinking in the west and calculated the hours of remaining daylight.

“Not soon enough,” she replied, understanding what he had not said. It would be dark before they met up, and there was only a slender chance that the search party riding above would even see *them*, much less children hidden in bushes.

She returned to calling their names, practically beckoning them to come out of hiding. If the twins could hear them, Pascoe was sure they would respond. Which meant, they were too far away to hear. Or

worse.

The temperature dropped until he could see Bridey shivering. He'd not prepared for a night on a mountain. He yanked at his own coat until he'd maneuvered it off, then rode over to throw it over her shoulders. She glanced at him in concern, no doubt inspecting his shoulder for blood. It ached, but it was healing.

"My waistcoat is good worsted," he told her. "And the rain is starting."

That she didn't argue revealed the extent of her weariness. He couldn't remember when they'd last eaten. The children would be famished.

The rain clouds obliterated the last of the fading sunlight. Their cries echoed off the rocky crag ahead. Just a little more, he vowed, maybe until they met Fin's search party. Then he could persuade someone to take the countess home. She needed to go home, to forget him and his wandering brats, make a name for herself, marry a marquess, whatever she was destined to do.

But first, please let him find his demon spawn.

Bridey made a strangled noise and pushed ahead, guiding her horse out of the tumbled rocks of the valley bed, up the hill in the direction of the distant road.

Pascoe could see and hear nothing. What was she seeing? Straining for any sign, he followed in her path.

Looking as wet and miserable as he felt, Bridey pointed to an outcropping of rock ahead. "There. They must be sleeping. I think Edward may be hurt."

How the devil...? Not bothering to question her uncanny intuition, Pascoe pushed his tired horse up the hill. Crumpled grass and the scent of innocence aroused his hope. The horse nearly passed the pair nestled under the roots of a dead tree like two foxes in a burrow, sound asleep.

Bridey slid off her mount and raced to gather them in her arms, weeping and swearing.

CHAPTER 26

BRIDEY CUDDLED the now crying children. Exhaustion and terror collapsed her mental defenses. In anger, she confronted the spirit that controlled them, as Pascoe had suggested.

“Let them live their own lives!” she cried, not knowing if a hovering pink aura could actually hear. “Go, leave them be! Pascoe is a *good* father. Or he would be, if you’d let him alone.”

She thought she felt anguish, rage, and terror, but they could all be her own emotions. Having avoided this use of her gift all her life, she had no idea if she was reaching the spirit fluttering and flailing around the weeping children—the senseless spirit that kept trying to reunite the children with their father and thus endangering them.

Pascoe crouched down, protecting his offspring from the rain with his broad back. He grasped Bridey’s cold hands, lending her his strength while she battled with her mind and nothingness.

“Mama is sorry,” Emma whispered sleepily. “I’m very hungry. Can we eat now?”

They could have died out here, Bridey shouted inside her head, not wishing to upset the children. The aura felt sad as it floated higher. But she still felt an insistence, a stubborn determination. And she had the dreadful knowledge of what the spirit wanted.

Pascoe needs to be loved. He is too important, too extraordinary to be tied down, Bridey argued. *I am not his choice and not what he needs.*

She could be his *choice*, she supposed, since he’d asked. But they would both be miserable settling into a domesticated life for which they weren’t meant. The pink aura felt sadder. She didn’t leave, but she diminished. Bridey had no other words to fight her.

“Bridey?” Pascoe asked uncertainly. “Are you all right? You look pale.”

She closed her mental shutters and shook off the spirit’s pain. “I’m fine, just thanking the powers that be that they’re safe.”

He still look concerned as he offered his hand to help her up. “If we can carry them up the hill, the others might find us. Do you think you can manage?”

She squeezed his hand gratefully but didn’t stand yet. They both wore gloves, but his warmth radiated into her. “Let me look at Edward’s ankle first.”

“It hurts,” the little boy said bravely. “I fell down.”

"I fell first, and he helped me," Emma volunteered. "Mama says we're to say we're sorry. Is the kitty all right?"

The kitten, of course. Bridey couldn't remember if the kitten was still in the carriage. She sent Pascoe a pleading look as she examined Edward's swollen ankle.

"The kitten is just fine," he said reassuringly. "Kittens can find their way with their noses, but children can't. You must stay in sight of others until you know your way around."

"I told you," Edward said. "I told you the kitten would find us, just like Papa does. And the doggies." He strained to look around Bridey. "You brought Roscoe?"

Busying herself with examining his ankle where his aura indicated injury, Bridey stopped a moment to listen for dogs, but she only heard the pounding of rain and a river of water flowing below.

"Give me your neckcloth so I can wrap his ankle. He can't stand on this." Bridey held out her hand, acting on habit. The exhaustion of opening her mind combined with her physical fatigue had left her running on nothing.

By the time she had the boy's ankle wrapped, the hounds were howling and scrambling down the hillside. Edward had *heard* the dogs before they arrived and called them?

In the distance, men shouted and cursed. "Fin has found us," she said in relief.

The deerhounds leapt excitedly over Pascoe in their attempt to reach the children. Pascoe helped her push the dogs aside so she could pull the bandage tight, then rose to signal the riders on the hill.

She finished tying the linen, but couldn't remember anything after that.



STILL IN SHIRT AND TROUSERS, Pascoe lay on Bridey's bed, holding her in his arms, listening to a clock tick. She'd been unconscious most of the ride home. She woke enough to protest being taken to the manor, but he had no intention of sleeping anywhere except with her, with his children in the next chamber. The earl's kitchen had had a hearty soup prepared when they arrived, and he'd made her eat some, but she'd collapsed on the bed as soon as he'd taken her upstairs.

He prayed he hadn't killed her. Losing a vibrant woman like Lily had shattered all his illusions of immortality. Anyone could die at any time. He'd almost lost the twins tonight. His gut gnawed its way to his heart. He might never sleep again for fretting. He never worried about his own carcass, but women and children. . . Terrified him.

Had he been pushing them away out of fear?

Rather than wake any maids, he'd undressed Bridey so she didn't develop a putrid fever. Her valise was still at Fin's, so he simply snuggled all that lush nakedness into the blankets. He held her for warmth and prayed that her unconsciousness was simply exhaustion from whatever mental exertion she'd performed with the children. He'd already learned that physicians took days to arrive from Edinburgh, if they arrived at all.

The past horrifying hours kept replaying through his tired brain. He slept out of sheer exhaustion, but his dreams filled with specters and phantoms and his children disappearing into the mist.

By the time he woke, he knew he had to change his life. He just didn't know how. He couldn't abandon his task here. He had hoped if the dangerous incidents halted while Darrow was in London, he could leave the place to Fin and a good steward. But if Bridey was right and Darrow lingered. . .

He wanted to send Bridey and the twins to the safety of Wystan, but that had ended in disaster once. He didn't want to let them go without him again. Probably arrogant of him, but he'd inherited his fair share of noble arrogance and more. He couldn't leave until he had at least searched the foundry.

As dawn peeked through the draperies, Bridey stirred in his arms, and his body responded. Mindless sensation appealed. He leaned over and kissed her brow. She murmured in a tone that didn't seem to protest, so he slid his hand under the covers to cup her bare breast.

She curved her hand around his neck and brought his head down to kiss, and all his troubles momentarily fled. Perhaps he simply needed to indulge in mindless sensation more often. She'd told him he must broaden his focus—to include her? And his children.

Bridey enveloped him. All his skilled vocabulary could not summon a better word. She surrounded him in feminine earthy scent, lush female pulchritude, soft flesh, and erotic moans. While they held each other, no other world existed. She wound her arms and legs around him and took him in until his hardness blended with her softness, and this physical act of bringing her pleasure was the most important goal in his life.

He bit her shoulder to keep from crying out as he spilled more than his seed, but his very essence into her. Her fingernails raked his back as she accepted what he offered.

If only reality could be as simple.

They both heard the twins at the same time.

Pascoe propped himself up on his good side and smiled down at Bridey. She was all flushed and pink, with her auburn hair spread across the pillows. "You look like sunrise," he told her. "I really want to wake with you on my pillow every morning. How do you feel?"

“Sore in every muscle, satisfied to the core, and hungry. Why are you still dressed?” She tugged his shirt back down with a look of regret, not acknowledging his pillow comment.

“Because we sent the maids to Wystan, if you’ll recall. I didn’t know if I’d have to chase the brats through the halls in the middle of the night.” He rolled over and began shoving his wrinkled linen into his trousers. “What do I do with them now?”

“Do I have any clothes?” she asked, peering around the room. “I could fetch them if I could dress.”

The temptation to turn his children over to Bridey was great, but he was starting to see the flaw in that plan. If Bridey did not want him and they went their separate ways, the twins would be beyond devastated to lose another “mother.” It was time he accepted responsibility for what he’d created.

He leaned over and kissed her hair. “Rest. I’ll find someone to fetch your clothes from Fin. It shouldn’t be too hard to lead the twins down for breakfast, should it?”

She chortled and dived under the covers. “Tell me later how well that works and give me one of your shirts so you can send a maid up with tea for me.”

He had a thief to catch, but Pascoe led his children down to the breakfast room as if he were their nursemaid. Just holding onto their little hands after almost losing them did his soul good. With the guests gone, there was none to complain about children out of the nursery. Even the earl hadn’t deigned to appear.

His babes ate as politely as four-year olds could manage, craning their necks to examine the high-ceilinged room and enormous buffet with delight. He only had to catch a tipped cup once.

Not until they were almost done did Edward twist excitedly in his seat and watch the doorway. “Roscoe!” he cried. “May I play with the doggies?”

“You will finish your breakfast first,” Pascoe said, recalling some long ago nursemaid saying the same to him. It had to have been a good long time ago because his nephews and cousins had driven off all the maids by the time he was six or seven.

Should he fret that Edward seemed to know the hounds were coming when no one else did?

Fin entered a few minutes later with the deerhounds on his heels. He glanced at the nearly empty breakfast table and frowned. “Bridey isn’t up yet?”

“She has no clothes, you’ll remember. You could have brought her bags with you.” Pascoe used a linen to wipe jam from Emma’s mouth. He’d just dined with a king a few weeks ago, and now he was reduced to wiping jammy mouths. He’d be the laughing stock of his all-male

family if they knew. And he didn't really care. Emma's big grin warmed all the cold spots that had formed in his heart.

"I've not been to the house yet." Fin heaped a plate with every offering on the buffet. "The fires are out, so I stayed overnight with the former foundry manager. We're developing a plan to put the men to work rebuilding once we have funds. People are starving. We can't waste any more time."

"I've asked Myers to come here to meet Carstairs and bring the papers necessary to sue for the return of the investments." Pascoe didn't want to mention hunting Darrow in front of the twins. "I need to talk to you about searching the foundry."

The children had climbed out of their chairs after cleaning their plates and were on the floor, talking to the dogs. He'd almost swear the dogs were listening.

"I don't like it that Bridey thinks Darrow is still here," Fin grumbled, digging into his food as if he hadn't eaten in a week. "Is there any chance you can ask Lord Theo to escort Bridey back to Wystan? If she stays here, she'll be out wandering the village again."

Pascoe hated asking anyone for anything, but he knew it was best for everyone if Bridey returned to Wystan and the women who needed her—where no one called her witch.

Except, if he sent Bridey away, he ought to send the twins, and that defeated his purpose in separating his children from the woman who would never be their mother—not to mention that yesterday's disaster had discouraged any notion of going anywhere without them.

Pascoe rubbed his head, not wanting to believe Bridey's warning about Oscar but knowing she'd been right too often to ignore. "What I would like to do is surround the foundry with men and find some way of driving out anyone hiding in there."

"And do what with him if he is?" Fin asked unhelpfully through a mouthful of toast.

"Assuming I can't hang him," Pascoe said grimly, "I'd take him to the duke for judgment. He's the next nearest magistrate. We can't expect Carstairs to rule if it's his own brother."

"Transportation for theft might be enough," Fin agreed, "but he will probably have to be held for assizes. Darrow will scream bloody murder."

"And His Majesty will have my head," Pascoe said with gloom. He'd given up all hope of earning a knighthood after he'd not managed to save the foundry or stop the mine strike and had nearly lost the earl. Arresting the king's godson on theft was the final nail in any title. "I know. But I see no alternative."

"Rosy wants to go out," Edward called from the floor. "Can we take them outside, please?"

"May we," Pascoe corrected absently.

"There's a walled garden out back," Fin offered. "Send them with one of the maids. It's not too drizzly."

"Please, Papa?" Edward asked. "Roscoe really needs to go out too."

A week or so ago, they wouldn't even talk. Hearing them call him *papa* lodged hooks in Pascoe's heart. He wished to give them the world, even while recognizing that would be bad for them. Still, he could manage a maid and a garden. He sent a footman out with his request, and moments later, the children were cheering and running for the back door, the dogs yipping happily on their heels.

"A message from Lord Theo came in last night," Fin said, filling up his plate again. "He said he has a brother who is a dog trainer in the vicinity. Since Lord Erran has arrived at Wystan and is apparently wearing out the floors, they mean to hunt down their brother and bring him here."

"Why?" Pascoe asked, finishing his coffee. "The dogs don't need training."

"The dogs found you in the rain, without needing to track your scent. They *knew* where you were." Fin said that as if it were significant.

Pascoe puzzled over the significance a moment, then realized Bridey's young scientific brother was voicing the same impossible suspicion as Bridey had. "You think the twins somehow *called* the dogs? A bit preposterous, wouldn't you say? They were miles apart."

Fin shrugged. "I've learned not to question the weird. It is what it is. But Lord Theo thinks his brother would be interested."

"That would be Will. He could be useful." Pascoe stood up, torn between checking on the children, Bridey, and looking for Darrow. And then it occurred to him that if his nephews were coming. . . "Did they say how long it would take them to arrive?"

"They didn't seem to think he was far away, something about a sheepherding competition? Other than that, no."

"If the solicitor arrives today, I may have a plan that will put some of your men back to work, start rebuilding the foundry, and flush out Darrow if he's here instead of in London. Do you have a few good men you trust?"

Fin shoved his plate away and stood up. "I do. What do you need?"

Solving tricky situations was what he did best—as long as they didn't involve women and children.

"It may be safer to wait until my nephews arrive to search the foundry." Opting for what he knew he could do over what he didn't understand, Pascoe took Fin into the study to draw up a battle plan.



HAVING slept late and bathed while waiting for her traveling clothes to be freshened by inexperienced housemaids, Bridey came downstairs after noon. To her surprise, three large Ives men in their riding gear were consuming large quantities of food in the breakfast room. Or she assumed they were all Ives. The two she didn't know had the same stubborn chin and high cheekbones as Lord Theo and Pascoe, although they differed in enough ways to make them distinctly themselves. One had dark bronzed hair and lacked Lord Theo's ascetic leanness or Pascoe's elegance. He appeared more of a bull-chested farmer. One had Pascoe's thick black hair but was shorter, broader, and his clothes were even more finely tailored than Pascoe's. He had to be Lord Erran, the politician. Why wasn't he with his wife, waiting for the birth of his babe?

"Is everything all right at Wystan?" she asked in alarm.

"The infant sleeps and cries and defecates prodigiously," Lord Theo said with a shrug.

"My anticipation for one of my own is met only by my desire to have my wife back," Lord Erran added grumpily.

"Celeste told him to get out or she'd throw him out," Theo said with a laugh. "She and Aster are drawing and embroidering star charts and baby things and poring over old volumes, convinced Pascoe is a dark knight and his children are prodigies."

"Or some such faradiddle," Erran added.

"Dark knight?" Bridey asked cautiously. When all the men shrugged, she tried not to roll her eyes. "Lord Theo, might you introduce me before this conversation becomes any more confusing?"

All three men hastily shoved back chairs and had the grace to look embarrassed, although the bronzed farmer showed it only with a slight grimace.

"Sorry. We were raised by pigs and sometimes revert to form," Lord Erran said apologetically. "I'm Erran Ives, Theo's youngest brother. This is William Ives-Madden, our half-brother. He talks to animals and not to ladies." He punched the arm of the bull-like, bronzed-hair man.

Given his name, Bridey assumed he was one of the many illegitimate brothers. Mr. Ives-Madden seemed unperturbed by the punch and merely bowed his head in greeting.

"Seat yourselves, gentlemen, and finish your meal. I'm trying to track down missing pieces and am just passing through. I don't suppose you have seen Mr. Pascoe or my brother, have you?"

"We were told they had gone to a meeting and were expected back shortly. So we thought we'd avail ourselves of your kitchen's

hospitality while we waited. Is Carstairs about yet? We were told he'd be coming down." Lord Theo didn't stand on ceremony but returned to the table as told.

"I haven't heard any metal falling off the walls, so he's probably not out and about yet. He'll be glad for your company."

"Metal?" Theo and Erran asked, much as she'd asked about *dark knight*. The inexplicable was hard to explain.

Mr. Ives-Madden was more direct. "The twins are the ones with the dogs? Are they about?" He remained standing.

Three big Ives men in the same small room, focusing their attention on her, was a trifle. . . *intense*. Bridey hoped Pascoe returned soon. She really needed to go out in society more if these strangers so easily intimidated her. "You must ask your uncle about the metal."

Curious why a grown man would be interested in twins and dogs, she turned to the impassive Mr. Madden. "I was told the children were playing in the garden with the dogs."

"Will talks to animals," Theo explained with the wave of a fork. "Your brother says Edward may be a dog talker, so Will is keen to meet him."

Bridey bit back laughter at how these men communicated, or didn't communicate. Mr. Madden didn't object to Theo being his spokesman but merely waited to be instructed, apparently to the direction of the dogs.

"Did you wish to finish your refreshments or shall I take you to the garden now? The children are some of the missing pieces I'm searching for."

The big man grabbed bread and meat, crunched them together in his huge fist, then waited expectantly to be led. In comparison, Edward was a first-rate chatterbox.

She led him through to the back of the house and into the walled rose garden.

Where the dogs whined anxiously, but there was no sign of the children or their maid.

CHAPTER 27

INSIDE THE ABANDONED FOUNDRY GATES, Pascoe rode along the brick foundation, glancing up at the crumbling chimneys. "How long will it take to rebuild, do you think?"

Fin uneasily sat his horse some distance from the rain-wet, rambling structure. "Depends on how much money and how many men we have. Bridey worries that Darrow could be out here, looking to kill you and bring soldiers. Shouldn't we return to the manor and wait for your nephews?"

"As I said, we need to lure him out if he's actually in there," Pascoe said with a fatalistic shrug. "Whether it's now or later makes little difference. We still have no evidence that he's anything more than a sniveling thief taking advantage of his brother's foolishness. If he's behind the earl's accidents, he'd have to hit me over the head with falling brick to be true to form. If anything, you are in as much danger as I am."

"You will notice I am leading you far from any falling walls," Fin said. "But most of these walls are solid. It's the furnace and floors that need replacing. If we don't venture inside, we should be safe enough," he added dubiously.

"The place stinks of desolation, but it seems solid from the exterior." Satisfied with his inspection, Pascoe turned his mount around. "Let us hie back to the house and see who has arrived. If my nephews are here, I think we can use them to set up a ring of men along the wall of the foundry. Then we'll send William in with the dogs to see if we can flush out Darrow, if he is actually here."

"If Bridey saw him with that weird eye of hers, then he's here somewhere. She can be scary." Fin looked at him quizzically, as if awaiting a reaction.

"Your sister is many things. Scary is not one of them." Pascoe kned his horse back up the lane toward the manor, his instincts not happy. Unable to pin down what was bothering him, he eagerly rode back to Bridey and the twins. Back to the *twins*, he reminded himself. Bridey would be riding off with his nephews to see to the women in Wystan. He had to parcel her away as part of his past, as he did everyone he met in his travels, and return to his real life.

Although, until now, had he really been leading any life at all?

When Will met them half way down the lane, dogs leashed and

yipping anxiously, Pascoe knew his instincts had been right again. In alarm, he sent his horse galloping up to meet him.



BRIDEY SIGHED in relief after the dogs directed them to the children nibbling biscuits and milk in the kitchen. The maid who'd been assigned to them had been hovering protectively, just as she should.

"After yesterday, we all worry about them too much," Bridey said to Lord Theo, who had joined her in the kitchen. "It is a good thing your brother understood that the dogs were telling us where to find them or we'd be hunting the entire valley again."

"Will also said that the dogs were upset," Theo reminded her. "So there may yet be cause to worry. He's taken them to find Pascoe, just in case."

Bridey tried to imagine the bronzed farmer talking to the dogs the way Edward did and couldn't, but she'd be happier if Pascoe were here. "Edward, did Roscoe and Rosy seem upset to you?"

The boy wiped his milky lip and shrugged. "They wanted to come down with us, but Cook said they couldn't."

Bridey was about to accept that as explanation enough when a hair-raising scream curdled her blood.

Lord Theo and Lord Erran bounded for the stairs. Everyone else froze.

"The earl," one of the footmen said in horror, apparently recognizing the voice.

Fighting panic, Bridey nodded at the footman and the butler. "Follow Lord Theo and do as he tells you."

The two men didn't have to be asked twice. They took off on Theo's heels. Swallowing her fear, accepting that she couldn't be two places at once, she turned to the Cook, maid, and kitchen servants. "Don't let the children leave your sight, please. They're quick and they disappear easily, so keep them occupied."

The children watched her with bright eyes filled with curiosity, but they didn't seem too concerned. She thanked heaven—or their invisible mother. Bridey kissed their dark curls, lifted her traveling skirt, and ran upstairs. Following the sound of male voices urgently ordering each other around, she arrived in the main corridor—where Carstairs was clinging head-first to his precariously dangling gallery. The balcony had come unhinged on one side and was hanging from one beam and bouncing against the wall below. The earl lay flat across the threshold, trying to grasp swaying floorboards.

In the second-floor doorway, gripping the earl's legs, was Jack, looking ashen and terrified. The lad was scarcely strong enough to

hold up a full-grown man, but he'd braced himself on either side of the door and acted as ballast.

Bridey bit her lip and held her hand over her pounding heart as Lord Erran appeared in the doorway behind the boy. With a few quiet words, he reached over Jack's kneeling figure, grabbed the back of the earl's coat, and yanked him back to solid floor.

The servants standing below shouted and clapped, and Bridey thought she might expire of relief. She really didn't want to send for the duke for another cracked head.

She ran up the stairs to hug poor Jack, while the Ives brothers returned a visibly shaken Carstairs to his chamber. "What in heaven's name happened?" she asked, leading the trembling boy after the men.

He glanced at her worriedly, then back at the men. "I don't rightly know, my lady. It all happened so quick."

She checked the open closet door. "What happened to all the shelves? I thought Mr. Pascoe had them returned and the door locked?"

"He did, ma'am," a footman reported, looking equally puzzled. "I helped him myself."

"Will you see to it that the gallery door is locked and guarded until a carpenter can find a way to make it impassable?"

"Yes, my lady." He stood in front of the closet while the housekeeper came running with her keys.

Wishing she could do more, wishing Pascoe were here, Bridey led Jack down to the earl's bedchamber.

Carstairs was rubbing the back of his shaved head, pacing with jerky steps around his room, refusing to sit down. "I was pushed, I swear. The damned ghost *pushed* me!"

Bridey sent Jack a sharp look. He shook his head indignantly.

"The closet was filled with linens just yesterday," Bridey asserted, before they started questioning ghosts. "Pascoe nailed the gallery door shut because the gallery isn't strong enough to hold a man's weight. No ghost used a key to open the closet, removed all those linens and shelves, plus the bar on the door. *Darrow* has keys."

She ought to feel guilty convicting Oscar without evidence. But if he was a thief, and he lingered here instead of escaping. . . Perhaps he wanted title as well as wealth.

"Darrow has keys to the manor?" Theo asked, immediately alert.

"The outer doors are barred at night," she said, understanding his point. "And Pascoe has guards posted on them. No one can enter without notice."

"Who is that boy?" Carstairs asked querulously, catching sight of Jack hiding behind Bridey's skirts. "He saved my life."

"Are you sure he's not the one who pushed you?" Lord Erran

asked, leaning his shoulder against a wall and crossing his arms while studying the boy.

"I would not!" Jack said indignantly. "I ain't big enough, no how."

Carstairs waved a hand. "The push was between my shoulder blades. The boy don't stand tall enough to push my bum." He turned apologetically to Bridey. "Pologize, my lady, but that boy is a hero, and I won't hear otherwise. Don't suppose you have more of them headache powders? Hanging down like that has my skull coming off."

"I can ride over to the house and mix more," she offered. She feared the earl wouldn't be quite so taken with Jack once he learned who he might be. Now wasn't the time to tell him. "First I need to know we're all safe from murderous ghosts. What were you doing in the closet?"

He frowned and rubbed his head more. "The door was open. I was wondering if the carpenters had returned to finish building the gallery since I didn't order them up."

Bridey was grateful that the Ives brothers didn't question the idiocy of a balcony overhanging a corridor and not a ballroom. "So you stood in the doorway to see if there were men in the closet and someone shoved you? Or could you have just lost your balance?"

"They shoved, and I *tripped*!" He added the last excitedly. "I remember tripping and then just plunging onto the gallery, head first, like a great galumph. Then the whole thing tilted and nails started ripping out and the boy ran up and grabbed my boots."

Everyone turned to look at Jack. Looking wary, he emerged from behind Bridey. He sent her an rueful glance first. "I was in the blue room. I heard all the strangers and thought I'd listen to see what was about, so I left the door cracked open. The maids don't go in there unless there's guests, so I figured I wasn't hurting anybody."

"Who the devil are you?" Carstairs asked again.

"That's a matter of some dispute," Bridey explained. "Let's wait on that matter. He's been staying with Fin. Go on, Jack."

At Fin's name, Carstairs snorted and settled into a chair, looking as if he really needed headache powers.

"I thought I heard someone walking by, so I ducked behind the door."

"How long were you up there?" Lord Erran asked, interrupting.

"I kinda fell asleep there last night," Jack explained, rubbing his nose to hide his embarrassment. "I didn't wake up until I heard all of you in the breakfast room, so I figured I'd bide my time a while longer."

"Did you hear the clock ring the hour? Do you know what time it was when you heard footsteps?" Bridey asked.

"It rings only once at one and at the half hour, so I don't know if it was one or half past," he answered. "But it was the earl I heard first. Ask him the time."

"One of the clock," Carstairs said. "What does it matter? I knew I was keeping guests waiting, so I was in a hurry."

Jack nodded. "I heard him and stayed back. I wasn't hearing much from the breakfast room anyway. I was wishing the gallery was finished so I could sit out there. And then Lord Carstairs stopped, I reckon to look in the closet. That's when I heard more feet, kinda funny sounding, like they wore slippers or stockings. I didn't think there was anyone else up here but me."

"Except you'd been sleeping and wouldn't know who was up there," Bridey added to clarify. Jack nodded sheepishly.

"What time did the children go down to the kitchen garden?" Lord Erran asked, coming alert and sounding like the lawyer he was.

"Before noon, I suppose. I went out to find them around twelve-thirty but they had already gone down to the kitchen," Bridey said.

Lord Theo frowned. "If the garden is walled off, would the house door to it be locked or guarded? Could anyone walk in?"

Bridey hesitated. "The wall gate is locked, but if the maid and dogs left by the house door, the footman might have thought the dogs provided adequate protection and taken a break."

"Will took those dogs out the back gate," Lord Erran pointed out. "It *wasn't* locked. You said Darrow had keys. If the maid and children were in the kitchen, and the footman wasn't at the door. . . Theo, why don't you take a look at that closet and see if there's a wire or string across it, near the floor? I think we need to start hunting for an intruder."

The men eagerly began plotting a thorough search.

Bridey looked at Carstairs' pale face and knew her time was better spent preparing powders so he was able to deal with what the future held. For the first time since the young earl had arrived in her life, she felt sympathy for him. He'd been given everything money could buy but never taught to handle the responsibility that came with great wealth, or to even think for himself—as the Ives men had.

But then, the Ives men had brothers they could trust.

Pascoe had shown her that men existed who were capable of thinking of others. She wished she could believe there would be another man like him for her, one who didn't have small children, and would let her do as she must. She feared such a creature didn't exist.

She tried not to consider the whisper of life that might be growing in her womb. She'd conceived before. It hadn't worked out well. Besides, it was too soon to know for certain that she wasn't fooling herself.

She left Jack to guide the Ives men to all the manor's hiding places, then slipped away. If Carstairs' assailant was hiding in the house, it should be safe enough to ride home for the headache powders. She called for her horse and a groom, and checked on the children while she waited. Reassured they were content with playing with the kitchen cat's new kittens, she hurried back upstairs.

To her amazement, Pascoe and Fin were riding hell-bent toward the house when she stepped outside. Mr. Ives-Madden trotted behind with the dogs, further down the hill.

"The twins? Is everyone all right?" Pascoe shouted. He flung his reins to the stable hand and practically leapt from his horse.

Fin more methodically climbed down and held his own reins.

With an audience watching with interest, Bridey couldn't run to Pascoe's arms as she wished. It was horrid being so close to this man, to understand his fears and needs, and still have to pretend she was no more than a hostess.

"The twins are happily playing with kittens. How did you know anything was wrong?"

Pascoe gestured back at Mr. Ives-Madden. "Will said the dogs were upset."

Bridey tried not to raise her eyebrows too high that he accepted his nephew's oddity. "It's the earl. Someone has tried to push him off the gallery. Your nephews seem to think there is an intruder, so they're setting up a search."

He grabbed her hand, but they were both wearing gloves, and there was only minimal comfort in this acknowledgment. "And you? Have you seen anything?"

That he asked warmed her heart even more than having him hold her hand. "Nothing unusual. But Carstairs didn't empty that closet and push himself off. If Jack hadn't been hiding upstairs and been there to catch him, I fear he would have broken his neck."

They exchanged speaking glances. "And you have seen no more indication that Darrow or any other stranger lingers?"

She shook her head at what he didn't ask in front of the servants. But she was done hiding who she was. "I have to literally see a person before I can see his aura. Auras are brighter than shadows, but that's the only advantage. Yesterday, I thought I saw Oscar's muddy colors through a crack in the boards covering a foundry window, but he's not a ghost. He needs food and water. The dower house is where he lives. It's directly behind the manor. If he entered and departed through the back gate as Lord Erran suspects, no one would have seen him. Someone probably ought to search his house."

"Carstairs doesn't have keys to the dower house. Since we thought Oscar heading for London and the books I needed were in the

manor office, we weren't too concerned. We'll have to break in to search." Pascoe frowned. "Where are you going?"

"To mix headache powders. I thought if I rode over, I could be back faster than walking and be there to hear if you found anything."

"Keep the groom with you. Until we know who is behind these incidents, I don't want you taking any chances." He squeezed her hand and hurried inside to join his nephews, with Fin on his heels.

That he cared enough to worry warmed her heart. She waved at Mr. Ives-Madden as she and the groom rode down the hill, then spurred her horse toward the house she'd called home for the first part of her life. The groom clattered at her heels on his sturdy pony.

"Hold up a bit, my lady," the servant called as they reached the bottom of the hill. "The pony's picked up a stone. I'll have to walk her."

She'd spent her entire life riding this village alone. She had only half a mile to go. "I'll go on ahead. You can catch up with me at my brother's house."

Only after she'd ridden around the curve that hid her from the manor did she feel an itch down her spine. After the morning's disaster, she heeded the warning and opened her inner eye to seek any danger in her path.

Ready to spur her horse into a gallop at the first sign of trouble, Bridey didn't see the heavy branch hitting her from behind.

She screamed in fury as much as fear as she hit the muddy ground.

CHAPTER 28

“WE’VE SCoured THE MANOR,” Theo said in disgust. “The intruder might as well have been a ghost. I’m ready to suspect servants.”

“Darrow only has a valet, and the man left with him,” Pascoe said, having already discreetly questioned the servants these last days. “Darrow locked the maids out, told them not to clean in the dower house while he was gone. We broke in through the window. The bed has been slept in.”

“We only have Bridey’s *vision* to say he’s anywhere about,” Erran reminded them. “A messy bed doesn’t mean anything, as young Jack has proven. Where has he been eating?”

Carstairs limped in, still rubbing his head. “Are you still blathering about Oscar? I tell you, he’s gone to London, took his man with him. He’d starve on his own.”

“His valet evidently fixes him tea and sandwiches when he’s at home,” Pascoe pointed out. “The kitchen over there isn’t completely empty. It has cheese and the remains of a stale loaf.”

The earl grimaced. “Oscar likes to eat while he works, so I suppose he knows how to slap meat on bread. Is Bridey back with those headache powders yet?”

At the question, Pascoe checked his watch and swallowed inexplicable panic. He practiced his best unruffled discretion and turned to Fin. “It’s been over an hour. How long does it take to make the powders, do you know?”

“She has all the ingredients. It’s just a matter of measuring and mixing with the mortar. Perhaps Mrs. Mac needed help. I can ride down and see.” He was already on his feet and headed for the door.

Pascoe didn’t know why he had a sudden desire to pop the lid off his fear, but without a second thought, he told Will, “Take the dogs out.” And as soon as he said it, his gut instinct drove him to his feet. “I’ll go. If Darrow isn’t *inside* the house. . .”

All the men stood. “Then he’s outside,” Erran finished for him.

Carstairs merely looked confused. “Why would Oscar prevent me from getting headache powders?”

In undiplomatic disgust, Pascoe strode into the main corridor and shouted, “Jack, come down and explain to the earl, again, why we are looking for his brother.”

Without waiting for the boy to emerge from hiding, he strode past

the butler in the direction of the front door. "Barker, see that all the doors are locked and that Mr. Darrow is not allowed in until we return."

The king would have his head if his godson was treated like a criminal without proof, but at this point, Pascoe was feeling too murderous to care.

"Yes, milord. . . sir," the butler agreed impassively, standing aside as Pascoe's three big Ives nephews followed in his wake like an invading army. Fin was already loping down the outside stairs.

The dogs trotted along on Will's heels, but he stopped to snap leashes on them. "Anyone have anything of Darrow's that I can let the beasts smell?"

Pascoe removed documents from his inner pocket. "These are the papers he used to have the funds transferred. Will they work?"

Will let the dogs sniff them. "Almost. Linen would have been better, but they seem to recognize the scent."

Pascoe trusted Will's instincts when it came to dogs and just nodded. "Fin, if you'll ride to your house to see if your sister is there, I'll follow Will and the dogs. Erran, I'd like to have you here to greet Myers, the estate's solicitor, when he arrives. Theo, if you have your telescope, Jack can direct you to the roof so you'll know if any of us needs help."

Theo looked amused. "Aye, aye, general. You missed your calling, old man. Except you'll probably find Bridey delivering a babe somewhere."

No, the air smelled wrong, as if the remains of the smoldering field fire lingered. Pascoe fought his fear. So many terrible things could happen to women. They were vulnerable. . . Remembering Bridey attacking a man twice her size with a pair of scissors, he swallowed his terror. *Lily* had been weak and vulnerable. Bridey was a warrior.

The dogs howled and took off down the hill, Will loping in their wake.

This would go a damned sight faster if he'd let them off the leash, but Will had insisted the dogs weren't properly trained. Did that mean they followed his nephew's mental commands? Pascoe feared he'd be thinking like a Malcolm if he kept this up.

Praying Bridey was safely in her home, mashing weeds into medicine, Pascoe mounted and followed frustratingly slowly in Will's wake.

They stayed on Fin's heels down the hill and around the bend—then the dogs veered into the oak grove, their high yips telling even Pascoe that they'd found a scent.

Had Darrow been here? Gripping his reins, not knowing whether to

hope or fear, he waited on the dogs while Fin rode on to his house in search of his sister. Pascoe wanted to go with him, but his duty was to find Darrow. Once the dogs began circling and barking, he dismounted to join Will in investigating the grove.

"Broken branches." Pascoe threw a dead tree limb to one side. "Crumpled grass. Horse droppings. Doesn't prove Darrow was here." But *someone* had been, and recently.

"They know his scent and Bridey's," Will said. "They were *both* here."

Both? How the devil. . .

Fighting rising panic, Pascoe tried to logic his way out of the impossible. The only way Will could know Bridey and Darrow were here was if he *mentally* communicated with dogs—as Edward might be doing. So, this was the reason his bastard nephew seldom spoke—he couldn't explain his Malcolm leanings any more than Edward. Maybe Ives needed a Malcolm library of their own.

Panic was making mush of his head. To hell with logic. If Bridey and Darrow had been *in the same place*. . . and the air reeked of trouble. . . Holding a check on his fury and terror by the hair's thread of experience, Pascoe asked, "Can you tell if they were here at the same time?"

"I can't tell, but my guess is yes. The dogs are straining to go that way." He pointed away from the village, through rough terrain fit only for goats.

Bridey had been gone well over an hour. She could be anywhere.

Digging around in the underbrush where the dogs had led him, Will silently held up a lady's lacy handkerchief soaked in blood.

Pascoe swayed with the explosive intensity of rage and fear. Since he couldn't beat up trees, he fisted his fingers to steady himself. "Follow the dogs," he said in a voice that sounded muffled and strange even to him. "I'm riding straight for the foundry, where Bridey thought he might be hiding."

He didn't wait for argument. Will could talk to his damned dogs. Pascoe would follow his nose for trouble. He spurred his horse into a headlong gallop straight through the village. If Darrow meant to conceal his presence, he would have had to take a more indirect, slower route. If Darrow was concealing his presence, then Pascoe deemed him guilty of every foul deed committed this past week. How far could he travel in an hour taking goat paths, dragging an unwilling woman?

Pascoe refused to believe Bridey was anything less than alive. His soul would wither up and die if he believed so vibrant a presence could be so easily snuffed.

He didn't question why he believed Darrow would bother with

Bridey. Fathoming the mind of a conscienceless, avaricious man was a pathway to madness.

He'd spent his life dealing with greed and fear while negotiating terms of a canal or estate borders or any number of mundane tasks where forbearance was a virtue. He didn't have to be patient and understanding this time, not if Bridey's life was in danger.

Action was the only option—if only to prevent his incoherent wrath from seething out his ears.



FURIOUS WITH HERSELF, Bridey ripped at the linen gag with her bound hands. Hitting Darrow with her riding crop and leaving a bloody stripe across his jaw was poorly done. She would *kill* him once she extricated herself.

Cursing her for an interfering witch, he'd bound her wrists and shoved the rag between her teeth. But he'd tied her wrists in front of her so she could cling to the saddle without falling.

The whole time they'd rode the rocky hillside, he'd railed at her, at his brother's uselessness, at Pascoe for not summoning the army he needed to control the strikers. Only when he'd begun ranting about his plan to use the wealth to restore the kingdom to medieval glory did Bridey understand the depth of his obsession—and mania. He craved power.

Now that he'd locked her deep inside the foundry walls, far from anyone who might hear her scream, he'd abandoned her to her own devices. She wasn't fooled into thinking that he didn't mean harm. If Darrow meant to kill his brother—or have him killed—he'd have to eliminate any witness to his presence in the village. She simply needed to escape before he discovered a way to make her disappearance an “accident.” Or buried her where she'd never be found again.

They'd come through so many doors, she wasn't certain she'd find her way out even if she unbound herself. In places, the burned out timbers had left frightening holes. He knew where to step. She didn't. In his own demented way, he was probably hoping she'd conveniently kill herself.

She needed to be able to scream if anyone approached. The rough rope scraped her wrists raw as she pried at the dirty linen in her mouth, but the gag finally loosened. She yanked it off and took a deep breath before looking around.

They'd climbed metal stairs to reach this room, so she knew she was in the attic above the machine shop. The ceiling of the lower floor was extremely high to allow heat to rise, so the attic was essentially

three stories off the ground—not a drop she could survive.

Still, she beat her shoulder against the wood covering the broken window, hoping to find a weak board. If she could loosen a nail, she might attract attention.

She'd simply have to make up for her stupidity by saving herself.



FEELING as out of control as a primitive savage on the warpath, Pascoe raced his mount up to the gate into the foundry yard—the *locked* gate. A chain hung around the bars. He and Fin had just been inside the walls a few hours ago. The gate had been open then.

Not even stopping to consider what he was doing, he rode his horse close to the wall, grasped the top of the stones, and climbed up.

With luck, Theo could see him through his telescope from the top of the hill. Pascoe stood and crossed his arms above his head, signaling danger, but he wasn't waiting around for help. He stood there a moment under the sullen skies, studying the blackened bricks of the massive foundry. The glass windows had blown out of the main building in the fire. Fin had ordered them boarded up to prevent children from exploring and hurting themselves. The chimneys to the modern blast furnaces had caught the worst of the heat. They looked in danger of toppling.

The grounds contained sheds and warehouses and loading docks that were in better condition. If Darrow had chosen to hide here, he had plenty of places from which to choose. But if he was concealing Bridey. . .

He would put her in the worst place he could think of—in the upper stories of the burned-out building where the floors were little more than charred timber.

Trying very hard not to think of what a criminal like Darrow might do to a woman he despised, Pascoe dropped to the ground on the far side of the wall. He needed Erran's compelling voice right now to call the bastard out of hiding.

The stench of fear was high, but it wasn't Bridey's fear. Standing behind a shed, Pascoe considered that. How did he know it was *fear* he smelled, much less whose? He'd used this instinct all his life, letting it guide his negotiations, but he'd never needed to identify whose fear he smelled. He just knew that when he smelled it, it was time to go in for the kill. If he'd been a gambler, he'd have swept the table.

But he wasn't a gambler. He liked certainty. Security. Knowledge was power. And he *knew* Darrow was here, because his stench was overpowering. Fear must be pouring off his skin like sweat.

Maybe ladies didn't sweat fear. Pascoe smiled darkly to himself as he rummaged through the tool shed. Maybe he was as odd as his children. Maybe the entire populace had secret gifts they didn't understand. He'd take up a study of the phenomenon as soon as he nailed Darrow to a door and found Bridey. He couldn't smell her gardenias.

She'd said she didn't wear perfume. What did his smelling gardenias on her signify?

Damn, but he was losing his mind.

He hefted a pickax and decided he might as well fly his true colors, because his career would be well and truly over when this was done.

Shoving a crowbar under his arm as if it were the walking stick he'd left behind, tucking his riding crop into his waistband, Pascoe carried the ax over his shoulder and followed the stench of fear on the wind. He'd never performed manual labor, but there was a first time for everything.

The ache in his wounded shoulder reminded him that Darrow most likely had a shotgun. If he wanted to find Bridey, direct assault would have to be a last resort, no matter how murderous he felt.

The wind carried him to the front office of the burned out building. Given the danger of charred timbers, that didn't make good sense from a safety standard. But a hiding place that dangerous would certainly discourage men with *brains* from entering. Fortunately, Pascoe was in too much fury to care.

"I wanted to defeat you on legal grounds," he roared his frustration at the boarded up building. "You could have enjoyed a nice tropical stay in New South Wales and employed your corruption there, taking advantage of all the other convicts."

Calculating that Darrow would have to open a door to shoot, Pascoe concealed himself behind an abandoned oxen wagon. He peered around the high wooden side to watch the office for any indication that he wasn't completely out of his skull.

Apparently impervious to insults—provided he was even in there—Darrow did not reveal himself.

"I can stay here all day and into the night," Pascoe called. "I've spent sleepless nights aplenty dealing with thugs far worse than you. You're soft, Darrow. You're rotted at the core. Tell us where to find Lady Carstairs and maybe we won't hang you."

Where had that "we" and "us" come from? The air reeked of fear—and of something less identifiable. *Defiance*? He jerked his head around.

On the road from the village to the foundry marched an entire army of villagers, led by Theo, Erran, and Will. And Fin and the dogs,

of course.

He was putting an entire village in danger of flying bullets and collapsing buildings. His Majesty would not only cut off his services, he'd cut off his head.

Pascoe didn't care. He was tired of smiling and manipulating and dealing politely with thieves and selfish arrogance and greed. Wishing for swords and the days of dragon slayers, he set down his crowbar, hefted the pickax, spun in a circle until he had the heft—and flung it with all the force of his body.

He couldn't hope to cause damage from this distance, but the pointed edge actually struck the charred wood with enough force to cause a leather hinge to fail. The slatted door sagged.

The stench of fear escalated. The rat was trapped. How many shotguns could he have? How quickly could he load one? Worse yet, what if there was a rear door to the office allowing the rat to scamper out through the foundry? It must not be a desirable solution if Darrow lingered in the office instead of fleeing.

"Fine then," Pascoe shouted at the sagging door. "We gave you an opportunity to come out alive. Now you'll have to run like the rodent you are. We'll have to assume you're guilty, and let the first man to catch you deal with you as he must.

He sounded like a blithering idiot shouting at ghosts. With Bridey at risk, he'd blither all he wanted.

He signaled the men pouring through the gates, carrying pitchforks and axes and any tool they could find. "Surround the building! Lady Carstairs is trapped in there!"

A woman's cry of fury erupted in the back of the mob, followed by more as the women burst through the ranks of men and rushed heedlessly for the building.

Pascoe wanted to feel guilt at putting them in the line of danger, but he was too appalled and astonished to do more than gape, as did most of the men. Using rakes and brooms and any utensil they'd carried with them, the women surrounded the building to rip at boarded up windows.

They'd drive Oscar out of a certainty.

A shotgun blast tore through the sagging door, hitting the oxen wagon where Pascoe stood. Splinters flew, but the women didn't even look up from their tasks. One cried in triumph as she broke through. Bridey had friends, whether she knew it or not.

Now that Darrow had shot his wad, one of the younger females grabbed the crowbar Pascoe had left at his feet and—looking murderous—went for the now-shattered timbers of the door.

Standing closer to the corner of the building, Pascoe could see what the crowd in front did not—the rat scurrying out a half-

uncovered window in back, one overlooking the dangerously steep, rocky hillside.

CHAPTER 29

DIGGING her fingernails under a board covering the window, Bridey jumped at the blast of a shotgun in the distance. Who was shooting whom? *Pascoe*! Panicking, she tore harder at the planks, twisting her wrists in their bindings to do so. Her fingers were already bleeding, but with the strength of rage and fear, she pried a single board from its nails.

A crack of daylight streamed in. Disappointingly, she could see nothing other than the rough hillside below. She was in the back of the building, where no one could reach her, even with a ladder.

“Wretched, miserable toad. . .” She swung to study her prison now that she had light. The room had only one window and one door. Her only hope of escape was in taking down the door—an utterly impossible task even had she been a man of muscle.

Terrified for *Pascoe*, she studied the wrought iron handle. Hoping for a miracle, she shook it with her bound hands. Locked. There wasn’t any keyhole. Who put locks on the outside of a door?

Darrow, of course. She wondered who he’d meant to hold prisoner in this room besides her.

She got down on her knees and peered through the crack. In the dark, it wasn’t easy to see, but she didn’t think she saw a wooden bar. Besides, the door opened in.

That meant there was a thumb latch, like back at the house—a flat piece of iron hooked over the latch, holding the door shut.

The door looked scorched but solid. Still, what choice did she have? Using her bound hands, she grasped the board she’d pried off the window and slammed the panel in hopes of loosening the latch on the other side.

To her astonishment, she heard metal hit the floor.

Dropping to her knees, she tried to peer under the door. Enough light filtered through the newly-opened window that she thought she might see a metal peg just a few inches away. A slender peg might fit in the crack between door and jamb and allow her to lift the latch, if she could just reach the peg.

She needed a wire or a bar or. . . *paper*.

She glanced around the dark shadows of the room. Surely these upstairs offices must have stored design books or invoices over the years. The fire apparently hadn’t consumed this rear part of the

building as badly as the front, where the furnaces were located. Fin would have had the valuable material carried out and stored somewhere safe but. . .

Underneath the table. She crawled over on her knees and elbows, then sat to kick her legs beneath the drawing table, grateful she was wearing a traveling skirt and not an acre of petticoats.

A sheaf of drawing paper coated in dust rolled out. Trying not to feel triumphant just yet, she listened to what sounded like an angry mob screaming in the distance. Even if she should shout her location, they wouldn't hear her. For all she knew rioters were setting fire to the building. Or hoping to burn her as a witch.

Fear and hope escalating equally, she crawled back to the door with the paper gripped between her bound hands. Biting her lip as the shouts grew louder, she pressed the rolled up paper back and forth until it was almost flat. The curled edges would make it difficult. . .

Holding her breath, she slid the heavy paper under the door and tried to work it beneath the peg. She could scarcely see in the dim gray light, and her own shadow blocked the best of it. Biting back foul curses, she persevered.

A man's voice rose above the mob's, but it wasn't Pascoe's. *Where was Pascoe?* What was happening out there? She gritted her teeth and worked harder.

Finally finding the right angle, she maneuvered the paper under the hunk of metal. Now came the terrible part. What if the peg was too big to fit under the door? She might rip the door off with her bare hands in frustration. Gently, so as not to dislodge the captive object, she dragged the paper toward her.

The peg slid under the door just as if it had been designed to do so. Weeping, Bridey cradled the slim metal awkwardly in her bleeding hands. She kneeled at the door, trying to slide the metal between door and jamb. Her fingers trembled, and her knuckles clumsily rubbed the handle. The peg fell and almost bounced beneath the door again.

"Sodding, hateful beast of a three-toed. . ." With difficulty, she gripped the slim peg again.

The man's mellow baritone outside rose louder, and the cries of the mob diminished enough to hear dogs howling. What, by all that was holy, was going on out there? Were they coming for her?

Not knowing whether to fear her old friends might search for her and plunge through the charred holes to their deaths—or set fire to the building—she hurried.



scuttling for the unfenced hillside. The rough terrain was inhospitable to horses and wagons. Darrow had evidently deemed the hill too steep for thieves and had pinched pennies by not continuing the wall around. The hill might keep thieves out, but it didn't keep one from escaping that way.

The mob was still pouring through the front gates, unable to see Darrow's flight. This time, Pascoe refused to let him go. He might let the king deal with his godson if he was just a thief, but no man harmed a lady and endangered an earl without consequences. That Darrow had hidden here instead of going to London, and ran now instead of defending himself, all but sealed his guilt. He had proved himself unfit for civilization.

Pascoe had to pray that his intrepid Bridey was unharmed, and his nephews would find her, because they weren't close enough to reach Darrow. No one—especially Bridey—would be safe while a madman like that existed to kill witnesses. Just the thought that Darrow might have already hurt Bridey had him sweating.

He might have spent much of his time in offices, but in the king's service, he'd also ridden the length and breadth of the kingdom more times than most. And he had a cold-blooded fury to drive him, even though he hadn't indulged in rock climbing since his misspent youth.

Pascoe's riding gloves helped him grasp rocks and roots, and his sturdy boots held him steady as he scrambled down the hillside toward the scrub-strewn dale. His injured shoulder ached like the devil from flinging the pickax, but he'd suffered worse.

With neither boots nor gloves, Darrow was scuttling like a crab over the rocks, causing small rockslides even in the mud. His soft shoes and pencil-grubbing hands slipped on a particularly nasty slope. With a cry, he slid to his knees.

Pascoe pounced. Grabbing the back of Darrow's coat, he yanked him to his feet and plowed his fist into the bastard's unshaven jaw. Action instead of words felt good. It felt *damned* good. He caught Darrow's neckcloth and lifted him off his feet, contemplating strangling him.

"You can't do this," Darrow shouted, flinging wild punches at Pascoe's torso while Pascoe held him at arm's length. "This is my land by right of the king! He'll have your head."

"I'll have yours first." With gratification, he released the murderous bastard and drove his fist into Darrow's soft gut. "Killing your brother requires execution."

"Did he die this time?" Darrow asked, almost with hope. "Without me, he would have been cheated out of everything, but he quit listening to me. He was too weak to do what needed to be done, but I'm not. He had to go." He struggled to his feet.

That was confession enough for Pascoe. He caught Darrow's shoulder, twisted him around, and plowed a fist into his jaw again, sending the dastard sprawling backward.

Shouts indicated the mob had finally extended around the building, and he had an audience. He didn't care. All the years of wanting to pound sense into rapacious clods who thought themselves above honest, hardworking men poured into his fists. He grabbed Darrow when he scrambled to his knees, straightened him out, then pummeled him repeatedly, as they wrestled and slid down the hill.

"Pascoe, stop that right now before you break your fool neck!"

The joy of Bridey's blessed shout pierced his rage, jerking him back to civilization. With delight and trepidation, Pascoe glanced to the top of the hill, where she was sliding from rock to rock to reach him, endangering her own fool neck. Above her stood two of his nephews, arms crossed, blocking anyone else from descending. He flashed her a victorious smile, then turned back to the termite trying to make his escape.

Freed from Pascoe's grip, a bloodied, limping Darrow continued his perilous flight toward the bottom. No longer feeling murderous, Pascoe gestured at the bottom of the hill and shouted back to Will and Theo. "Can you cut him off down there?"

"Fin has men on their way down," Theo shouted back. "They've herded sheep and goats on those ruts all their lives. Get yourself back up here before Bridey kills herself trying to reach you."

Feeling a bit foolish for losing his temper when Bridey was unharmed, Pascoe started the climb back up. When her look of relief turned to one of horror, he swung around, prepared to shove Darrow off the mountain if necessary.

It wasn't necessary. Darrow had loosened a small cascade of stones in his haste to escape. He slipped and slid now in the tumble, grasping for a root or boulder to stop his fall—without success.

The mob screamed as the king's godson pitched head over heels off a steep edge, disappearing into the scrub below.



SUBDUED after all the energy and emotion expended these last few hours, Bridey allowed Pascoe to haul her gracelessly across his lap and hold her as they rode back to the manor. Lord Theo and the others were leading a search party to find the earl's brother, or whatever remained of him. She wanted to berate Pascoe for taking his fury out on a lesser opponent instead of just hauling Darrow off to prison, but she understood helpless rage too well. Had she the opportunity, she would no doubt have done the same.

Instead, she tried to store the memory of Pascoe's muscled arms, broad shoulders, and hard chest holding her securely, his heart beating beneath her ear as they rode, surrounded by the people she'd grown up with.

They'd come to rescue her, not burn her as a witch. Tears crept down her cheeks at that realization, and because she knew Pascoe's task here was nearly done. He would be returning to his home in London with the children. Her task had not yet begun.

That the entire village had come to her rescue reinforced what she had always known she must do. Women in this vast north country were strong. They *needed* what she could teach them, and their husbands and children would fare better for their knowledge. She couldn't leave.

She had a hard time not sobbing into Pascoe's filthy coat as the people who had called her witch shouted their encouragement and pride all the way up the hill. She could no longer freeze them out of her heart. They were small-minded and superstitious, perhaps, but they were the people her grandfather had taught her to help. And maybe her help would open their minds, just a little.

"Was that Lord Erran I heard speaking to the mob?" she asked to distract her thoughts.

"Theo said he rode down to find out what was happening." Pascoe held her tighter. "I didn't see him, but it's good to know he can quiet a mob instead of just inciting one. Like the blamed lawyer he is, I think he went back to the manor and left the clean-up to us."

A man who could calm a mob was a wondrous thing, but he couldn't compare to a courageous man like the one whose muddy coat she gripped now, the one who did what had to be done, regardless of consequences.

Mr. Pascoe-Ives, His Majesty's urbane emissary, had dirtied his city attire, roared his rage, beat the king's *godson* into a pulp—because of her. He may have thrown away his diplomatic future—because justice had demanded it. What could she possibly say to a broad-minded, courageous man of action after that? He'd humbled her in many ways.

At the house, Pascoe helped her to the ground before dismounting. Unable to find words, hiding her tears, Bridey hurried up the stairs before he could finish giving orders. Torn by conflicting emotions, she needed distance to pull herself together.

By the time she was bathed and dressed, with her torn hands and wrists hidden inside gloves, it was nearly the dinner hour. The maids had informed her that the children were tucked into bed, blissfully unaware of events. The sooner she detached herself from them, the better off they would be, so she forced herself to nod as if assured her

guests were well attended, and nervously set off downstairs.

She'd been told that Mr. Myers, the financier, had arrived. He'd been in conversation with Carstairs—and Lord Erran, when he wasn't stopping riots—the better part of the afternoon. She rather hoped that Pascoe would have joined them by now, but no, he was waiting at the bottom of the stairs as she descended.

Her heart lodged in her throat at the sight of him. She couldn't speak, could scarcely breathe, the polished diplomat looked so tall and handsome and. . . resigned. He'd changed into formal dinner attire. Stark against his naturally dark features, his starched white linen nearly crackled in the same way his midnight eyes did at sight of her. She swallowed and made her feet take the next step. Whatever people called him, he was a gentleman to the bone.

His impeccably tailored black coat and trousers emphasized his masculine physique in a way few men ever achieved—perhaps because she knew the perfect conformation of muscle beneath did not need padding. Anyone else might see an effete government official or even a dandy with his gold watch fob and matching indigo waistcoat and pocket handkerchief, although he'd abandoned the monocle and gold-headed cane tonight. She, however, saw the real man beneath the disarming sheep's clothing.

But it was the look on Pascoe's face that caused the greatest anguish—a look of longing mixed with the same resignation that she suffered. In all else, he was so very confident, but in this moment, his vulnerability pierced her soul. She forced herself to breathe for both of them and continued down the stairs.

"How are your knuckles?" she murmured, accepting his arm as he escorted her toward the dining chamber.

"Ashamed of themselves," he said in a tone that could have been mockery or sorrow for all she could tell. "The men have found Darrow, his head crushed. I cannot make myself unhappy about the outcome."

"He admitted that he hoped Gilroy would die of his own incompetence," she told him. "He was frustrated that you would not do it for him, so when he saw the opportunity, he shoved him this morning in hopes others would be blamed."

"Still, avarice and madness are not reason to condemn a man to death," Pascoe said in disgust.

She squeezed his arm. "New South Wales will be better for it. He might have done well there with the other bullies and the king to give him authority. He chose the wrong road. I am only glad that you didn't fall with him."

"I never had a chance to inquire how you escaped." They entered the drawing room to discover they were the first to arrive. He kept her

hand on his arm and studied her with his enthralling blue-black eyes. "If he hurt you in any way, I will throttle his corpse."

She allowed a small smile at his ferocity. "Darrow always hated me because he feared me. It was one of the many reasons he drove me away. He thought I'd followed him when he caused me to fall from my horse. If he'd been carrying a weapon, it might have been a different story, but as it was, he didn't know what to do with me. So he locked me away until he had accomplished whatever he'd set out to do."

"And you escaped, all on your own," he said proudly. "I would have come for you, but I knew if you were alive, you would let us find you. And I couldn't bear to believe you were anything but alive or your ghost would haunt me."

She laughed and daringly stood on her toes to kiss his freshly shaved cheek. "Thank you for your confidence in me. You have no idea how much I appreciate a man who doesn't fear but *trusts* my abilities. I dreaded the thought of anyone breaking their necks while searching for me, so I had to save myself. But once I made it to the front of the building and people came looking for me, I called for a ladder. It was much safer to go down the outside."

"And it is for such episodes of sanity that I think the village thinks of you as *their* witch," he said in amusement. "They wish you no harm."

"Especially since they can see I don't fly," she added dryly. There were things she wanted to say, things she needed to discuss, but voices emerged from the corridor, and there was no time. "I need to leave for Wystan with Lord Erran in the morning," she said hurriedly. "Celeste needs to have me with her, and I should check on the new infant's health as well."

Pascoe's sharp features darkened, but he squeezed her hand and nodded. "Tonight? You will allow me tonight?"

She shouldn't. She knew she shouldn't. But she nodded yes.



PASCOE HAD ENDURED INNUMERABLE ENDLESS, tedious dinners, but he didn't know if he could survive this perfectly fine one without exploding with impatience.

As Lady Carstairs and the only woman present, Bridey was seated at the end of the table, with Theo on her right and Pascoe on her left. He could look but not touch as she skillfully steered all the competitive masculine arrogance at the table into smooth waters.

Keeping the peace was quite a feat once young Jack entered wearing tail coat and trousers. Pascoe judged the style as from a previous decade and probably some of Fin's cast-offs, but Carstairs

blustered as if a harmless kitten had transformed into a lion. “What the devil is this?” he roared. “Who dressed you like a gentleman? Will someone tell me who the devil you are?”

The boy waited uncertainly until Bridey directed him to the empty chair at Carstairs right. If their surmise was correct, young Jack actually belonged at the *head* of the table—not a task Pascoe wished to take on. He would leave the document search and any petition to Parliament in the hands of legal expertise.

Astounded by Bridey’s direction, Carstairs regarded the boy with doubt. “Whose nursery does he belong in? Is he Uncle George’s by-blow?”

“No, but we’ll save the entertainment until after dinner,” Bridey said, gesturing for Jack to sit. “We’ve had a difficult day and food is needed first to civilize tempers.”

Pascoe knew to be wary of that regal tone. The Frost Queen was plotting. Only he understood that her imperious attitude hid uncertainty and a heart too wide for her chest.

He couldn’t protect Bridey from herself, but he steered the rest of the table away from questioning by re-directing the conversation toward the estate solicitor. “Myers, do you have everything you need to put the estate assets back into production?”

The older man eyed his soup appreciatively and nodded. “Lord Carstairs has agreed to interview a steward I have recommended. Mr. Darrow’s untimely demise has returned all his assets to his only living male heir, the earl, so no lawsuit is required.”

“Excellent,” Pascoe said, already planning his tale. “If Fin will assure me that he can put the mines and foundry back into production, I will be able to report to His Majesty that the nation’s iron manufacture will soon be the best in the world again.”

Bridey kicked him under the table. He well deserved the kick for ignoring all but his own selfish goals. She was reminding him that if all Darrow’s funds reverted to his *male heirs*. . .

Botheration. He studied the boy inhaling soup as if he’d never been fed. The lad had obviously been raised properly. He was no urchin off the street, just a normal ten or eleven-year old who probably didn’t belong at the dinner table. Except Jack might be the real earl of Carstairs and *also related to Darrow*—who had died leaving all the estate’s investments in his name.

“Since all Darrow’s funds were stolen from the earl’s estate,” Pascoe said, wording his question with care, “wouldn’t they all naturally revert to the earl, regardless of other heirs?”

Theo and Fin were talking in low murmurs about some scientific theory, but Erran picked up on Pascoe’s tone. Even Will sent him a look of interest, although unless the topic involved animals, his

curiosity wouldn't last long.

Myers dipped his bread in the remains of his soup. "You mean, if Darrow left a son? The funds would go entirely to any son. It is only Lord Carstairs standing as only male kin that allows the funds to revert. Should there be any other male kin, the funds would be divided. Lord Carstairs could, of course, sue to have the entirety returned to the estate should other male descendants be located. It would be costly but most likely successful after the courts hear the circumstances."

"It would take years, unless Carstairs buys a judge," Erran added from his perspective as a barrister familiar with the system. "The equity courts are a scandal."

"By *male* kin, you mean the nieces and Darrow's mother are not entitled to part of Darrow's stolen funds?" Bridey asked.

The discussion grew heated, but Pascoe was no longer listening. His task had been to rescue the king's godsons from their stupidity and ensure that the mine and foundry continued production. He'd already failed with Darrow. Bridey was intent on believing voices in Emma's head and taking the earldom from the king's other godson. If she somehow established Jack in Gilroy's place, they'd compromise the amount of funds available to rebuild the foundry. And Pascoe found that he simply didn't care. No matter the outcome, his service to the king was done.

His children had to come first, before king, country, and unfortunately, Bridey, he feared. He was taking the twins and going home. How he would survive when he got there was a matter of conjecture. Perhaps he would go to the Americas where titles and name mattered for nothing in comparison to what a man could do.

He couldn't live off Bridey, who had only her dower income and whatever the duke provided. He would take her as wife in any way he could have her, he knew, but that would be selfish. Bridey deserved her midwife's school, and his children deserved a mother who stayed with them.

If he had learned nothing else these past few weeks, he'd learned that life was not just about what *he* wanted. Every action created a ripple of reaction, and he'd damned well better consider others while he was thinking about himself—or the kingdom or whatever other mission he set about. He needed to broaden his dangerously narrow perspective.

The conversation stumbled along on various topics after that, but Pascoe sensed everyone was waiting for the meal's end and the reason young Jack was sitting near the head of the table. Any keen observer would note the family resemblance between earl and boy and the various ancestral portraits scattered about the walls: rounded cheeks,

slightly protuberant blue eyes, blond hair with a cowlick in front, and long neck. Living in rural obscurity for centuries, the family had inbred far too long. One could hope Jack's mother had provided intelligence the father probably hadn't.

He tried hard not to remember Bridey shouting "Traitor, thief, and usurper!" while caught in one of her fits. He was learning how Bridey's mind worked, and he squirmed restlessly in his seat as the evening drew on.

Once the sweets and fruits were served, Bridey nervously squeezed Pascoe's hand. He welcomed the acknowledgment but despite his trepidation, he gave her the floor. She stood and gestured for their guests to remain seated.

Bridey was not a compliant woman. He could not lock her up for her own safety, or his convenience, as he wished to do. His insides grated at the knowledge.

"Gentlemen, I need to leave these halls in the morning. I would like to correct a possible wrong before I do. Young Jack has granted me permission to try to speak to his mother."

Pascoe wondered if he could tie her up and gag her, then remembered Darrow had done that—unsuccessfully. In resignation, he sat back and crossed his arms and waited.

Bridey continued. "I know many of you have no belief in the supernatural or the afterlife, but I would like you to bear with me. Call it entertainment and laugh it off, especially if I fail. But if I do *not* fail, I would ask that Mr. Myers follow through and substantiate whatever we learn."

Myers looked puzzled, as he should, but he nodded acceptance. Everyone else poked at their puddings or sat back with their wine and waited. Will, however, seemed almost animated in his interest. Pascoe really needed to have a long talk with his close-mouthed, dog-training nephew sometime.

Dressed in a daffodil-yellow silk that set off her hair like a brilliant sunset, Bridey strode to the far end of the table. Her authority was such that every man obeyed her order to stay seated, including Pascoe's arrogant nephews, who seldom did as told.

Apparently already forewarned, Jack was waiting for her. The lad sat stiffly, his hands in his lap, as she placed her fingers on his shoulders.

Finally accepting that the madwoman was about to do what he feared, Pascoe shoved back his chair and grimly stalked down to join her. *Entertainment*, indeed! If previous episodes proved anything, she could bring the house down on their heads. He checked the walls for deadly weapons and concluded the paintings would be no loss.

Ignoring Pascoe and everyone else, Bridey held on to Jack's

shoulders. "Mrs. Jonathan Darrow?" she called. With that eerie light in her eyes, she gazed at a distant corner of the ceiling.

The earl straightened in shock. Pascoe glared him into silence.

Bridey's lids narrowed, her pupils widened, and the whites of her eyes nearly disappeared. "Mrs. *Helen* Darrow, will you speak to me?"

Pascoe had seen that look in her eyes before, and his blood ran cold. He itched to grab her. She would kill him if he did. He clenched his molars.

"Jack wishes to know where you left your marriage documents," Bridey said in a hollow voice not quite hers.

Every man at the table squirmed except the earl and Jack. The earl's mouth gaped—had he known his uncle had married again? Jack sat mute and rigid beneath Bridey's grip, looking a little frightened.

She abruptly jolted and stiffened, as if hit by lightning. Pascoe braced himself to grab her if plates started flying.

"*With Oscar.*" The guttural voice emerged from the countess's lovely lips, frighteningly unlike Bridey's usually crisp contralto.

Pascoe wrestled with the need to blast whatever inhabited her. Then his intellectual shock that he actually believed this was happening—that she acted as a medium for spirits—forced him to swallow hard, fist his fingers, and wait.

Had she just said the marriage papers had been left with Oscar Darrow?

"*The miserable sod. . .*" Bridey's head dipped and shook before continuing in the strange voice. "*He promised!*"

"We're speaking of Darrow?" While everyone else sat frozen, Pascoe accepted the impossible and set about his usual task of confirming the argument and negotiating. He despised this with all his heart and soul, but he wouldn't fight Bridey, unless he thought she was in danger.

"Yes," the voice hissed. "*He knew my son. . . heir,*" it continued with bitterness.

"Did Darrow have the marriage documents?" Pascoe asked when even Theo and Erran stared in incomprehension. They would think Bridey mad—until proven otherwise.

Bridey swayed. Pascoe clenched his fists tighter to prevent reaching for her. Fin was on his feet, glancing worriedly from his sister to Jack to Pascoe, waiting for a command.

Jack lifted his small hands to cover Bridey's while she struggled. "Father made Mr. Darrow executor of his estate," the boy murmured, until Bridey straightened again.

"*Metal box,*" the guttural voice rasped. "*St. John's Chapel. We married!*" The last words emerged as a wail—and Bridey crumpled.

Pascoe caught her. Fin grabbed her hands. And poor shaken Jack

shoved his chair away so she no longer touched him.

Lifting an unconscious Bridey into his arms, Pascoe stalked out of the dining chamber to let the selfish lot straighten it out among themselves. If he never went through another performance like that again, it would be too soon.

CHAPTER 30

BRIDEY WOKE to find Pascoe removing her corset. After all she'd been through this past week, it seemed perfectly ordinary that His Majesty's envoy would be unfastening her undergarments. His harassed and irritated demeanor, however, did not seem natural at all.

She shoved his hands away and pulled the unfastened garment off, heaving it to one side and trying to remember why she was in bed.

"Dammit, Bridey, couldn't you have found a less dangerous method of learning about Jack's documents than letting a shrieking bitch into your head?" He sat down on the side of the bed and yanked her into his arms.

"She told us where to find them?" she asked, not minding being held but wondering what her brother and the other guests must be thinking.

"Enough to start a search." He worked at the ties of her chemise.

"You believe me?" she asked warily.

"I'm not sure I even have faith in a divine being, but then, He's never spoken to me the way you did! I'm broadening my mind," he grumbled.

She tried to smile at his irascibility, but she was still too dazed. "Shouldn't my maid be here?"

"We're pretending she's here," he declared. "I sent a servant to tell the others I'm with the children and packing to leave first thing in the morning. And that doesn't get you out of explaining what the deuce you were thinking."

"That Jack needed a home," Bridey said simply. Deciding if this was their last night together, they had better things to do, she kissed his taut jaw.

Pascoe instantly smothered her mouth with his, holding her as if he would never let her go. She wrapped her arms around his neck and rejoiced in the desire—and more—that he poured into his kiss. She'd never known this kind of physical pleasure, had never understood how desire enflamed the mind and senses and made pudding of her thoughts.

She should probably never trust another man to do this to her again, but oh, for just this one night. . . She tugged at Pascoe's linen, kissed his bristly throat, and reveled in his growl of frustration and desire.

"You have destroyed me, Brigid Finley, and made me useless for any other woman," he murmured, parting the laces of her chemise and pouring the hot lava of his breath down her breast. "But I cannot survive another day like this one."

"I know," she said sadly, feeling the life returning to her with his touch. "I cannot expect you to. Your children need a normal mother, one who will cover them in kisses and read them stories and not frolic with ghosts or disappear at midnight to deliver babies."

"But *I* need you!" he roared. "Or I do when you're not terrifying the breath from me."

"No, you don't. You can have any woman you want. You need only look at her with those beautiful deep eyes, and she will fall to her knees at your feet," she scoffed.

"There is only one thing to do with a woman on her knees, and while that might be a momentary pleasure, it does not begin to equal the joy you bring me when I simply look upon you."

She didn't understand his reference to a woman on her knees, but then, her mind was pudding. He fastened his mouth on her nipple and she arched into him, feeling the tug clear to her womb.

"You are life and fire beneath that frozen exterior. Tell me I am the only man who sees that." He tugged at her petticoats until she lifted her hips and let him pull them off.

In retaliation, she tugged at his coat until he wriggled out of it and flung it at a chair, not noticing when he missed.

"You are the only man I *trust* to see me," she said honestly. "I cannot live seeing you every day and not wanting this. I see you and I want you until I can think of nothing else. It's impossible. I have to leave for that reason alone."

His laugh held a note of triumph. "Good. I'm glad I'm not the only one who suffers."

"How do other people do it?" she asked as he continued undressing himself.

"I'll ask Theo and Erran sometime how they did it before they were wed. For now, it will have to be enough to know a frightening female like you can feel the same."

She laughed at his description, relieved that Pascoe was brave and open-minded enough not to have fled in horror after whatever she'd done tonight. Sometimes, she scared herself, so she respected the level of courage he displayed to still be with her.

She had only the lamplight by which to admire the rippling sculpture that was his magnificent chest. She wanted to be outside in bright sunlight so she might appreciate more than the play of shadow across those masculine planes.

And then he was kissing her breasts again, and she had to quit

worrying about the lonely nights ahead. He shifted to kissing down her torso until he reached between her thighs, and she left her mind entirely and became sheer physical sensation. He cleansed the ghostly spirits from the corners of her soul and lifted her into a heaven she might crave for the rest of her life.

And when she thought she could never move again, Pascoe thrust into her, filled her with his hardness, and grounded her to the earth and to the solidity that was him. She dug her fingers into taut arms, wrapped her legs around the fierceness of his physical possession, and cried her joy when he did.

In the morning, her bed was empty, and she wept, terrified that she'd never see him again. This was what she had wanted, but she felt as if she were being torn in two, ripped apart by a medieval torture rack. Perhaps, if she were two people—

The maid entered with tea and stirred the coals and promised to bring up freshened clothing. When Bridey sat up, she found Pascoe's monocle on the table beside the bed. She didn't know what it meant that he'd left it behind, but she clutched the warm metal in her fist for the long, lonely days and nights ahead of her.



“ASHFORD IS HERE!” The cry carried up and down the stairs of Wystan tower.

Lady Aster hurriedly tossed still another journal into her valise. “The beast *would* be early,” she said in agitation, glancing around her bed chamber for items left behind. “He probably drove the team himself, just because he can. Almost.”

Since the marquess was reported to be half blind, Bridey glanced out the narrow window with alarm. A very large Ives climbed down—from *the driver's seat*. Fortunately, there also seemed to be a liveried coachman beside him. She shook her head in disbelief but studied this man whose birth was separated from Pascoe's by only a few months. She decided she preferred Pascoe's lean, handsome, elegance to Ashford's broad bulk. “The marquess will stay here with his wife, will he not?”

“Oh, no doubt,” Aster said. “Christie will see to that, as long as she bears the babe before harvest, at least.” She laughed and handed the heavy bag of books to a waiting maid. “His chart shows Ashford will have his heir, so he'll stay in this outpost as sure as death.”

Footmen were already unloading the elegant berlin and a baggage wagon. “He is not thinking to keep his footmen, is he?” Bridey asked worriedly, rubbing at the hollow between her hip bones. “The magic here is rather powerful.” As she thought she had reason to believe—

and hope.

"No, the footmen will accompany us back to town. If we are to stop and visit the duke, we must arrive in style." Aster looked up as Celeste glided in, holding her newborn daughter. "There you are. I think we should plan our lying-ins this well in the future. Christie will appreciate your company."

"We need to move Wystan closer to town," Celeste said, laying the sleeping infant on the bed so she could straighten Aster's bonnet ribbons.

"That is why the property the duke has mentioned is so important." Bridey could scarcely conceal her excitement at finally having a chance to see the crumbling abbey in Yorkshire. The duke had said the abbey manor had been well maintained until war had removed the last of the baronets owning it a few decades ago. "It is almost half way between London and Wystan. If I am able to start my school there, I will always be close by."

"If you consider Harrogate close by," Celeste corrected with a smile. "But being close to the Great North Road will make you more accessible, of a certainty, especially if the babes are so inconsiderate as to arrive in winter."

"I am almost dancing with excitement," Bridey admitted. "Hurry, do. I must meet the marchioness before we leave to assure her that I will be back in plenty of time to deliver the heir."

"Dancing with excitement!" Aster crowed. "Look at you, all prim and proper and looking like a schoolmistress with your hair all pulled back, scarcely offering a smile! But I suppose it is an improvement over the moping you've been doing."

"Bridey doesn't mope when Pascoe's letters arrive," Celeste pointed out, picking up her daughter again. "Let us go down and warn Christie she must study the downstairs now before being condemned by our cruel taskmistress to bedchambers until she bears her babe."

Pascoe's letters had saved her sanity, Bridey reflected as she followed the chattering Ives ladies down to the tower's great hall. That he had not forgotten her when he returned to his busy city life had reassured her that their relationship had not all been in her head—or just physical. He poured his thoughts and concerns into his missives, as she did hers. That they could not be together was as much her fault as his—they both walked different paths. His duty to king and country was as important to him as her duty to women was to her.

When she'd told him that the duke had found a potential home for her school, he'd been as happy as she. She'd laughed at his suggestion that she be diplomatic in introducing herself to the Bath Hospital physicians in Harrogate. He'd insisted that the mineral waters

in the area could only be beneficial, and he'd talked to one of the gifted Malcolm ladies, who had agreed to help her experiment with them.

In return, she'd made as many suggestions as she could for working with his children and finding a nursemaid who would understand that they were *different*. She could not, however, help him with the king and his ministers when he griped about their obtuseness. She knew nothing of the milieu of London, society, or government in which he thrived.

She hadn't received a new letter in well over a week.

Downstairs, the powerful marquess of Ashford was bellowing worse than an oxen driver, ordering trunks hither and yon and sending servants into a frenzy—until his extremely pregnant wife entered. Lady Ashford was nearly as tall as her husband, more statuesque even than Bridey, with a sweet smile and a commanding presence that brought order with a mere gesture.

The thundering marquess transformed into a solicitous husband the instant the woman Aster called Christie claimed his arm. It took a moment before Ashford even noticed their arrival. Observing how the handsome pair regarded each other, Bridey thought she might melt into a puddle of goo.

She could not resent the marchioness for commanding such love and respect from a mighty Ives. It was Bridey's own fault for choosing an independent route, leaving her nights lonely. She'd lived with loneliness long enough to know she could survive.

Once introduced, Bridey bobbed her curtsy, then while everyone excitedly talked, she drew Lady Ashford aside to discuss dates and instructions.

"You will not be too far away, will you?" the lady asked, revealing the anxiety behind her commanding presence. "Ashford is likely to wear out the floors if I mention the slightest twinge. He really wants to chain you to the walls."

Bridey laughed, comfortable with this role. "They all do. The first babe is the worst. Enjoy his attention while you can. The next one, he'll probably go north to Scotland for hunting while waiting. Put him to improving the road into Wystan, make certain there are posting horses at the inn where the mail coach stops, and I shall ride like the wind if you must summon me early. And in the meantime, Celeste is here to reassure and entertain and teach you all about the ways of infants. Will you have a wet nurse?"

Lady Ashford shook her head. "Not if it can be avoided. Aster has found us wonderful nursemaids, but we are all agreed. If our children have any chance of possessing our odd gifts, it's best if we nurture them ourselves. Just look at how the Ives men have disregarded theirs

all these years!”

Bridey hadn't really been aware that Ives men had gifts, although she'd heard Lord Erran's speaking talent mentioned once or twice. Lawyers and politicians had to be eloquent, so she'd not thought more about it. She didn't dare ask if Ashford had a weird talent. The marquess was far too intimidating even half-blind.

“I agree that nursing is essential to forming a bond between mother and child,” Bridey said. “I don't think you'll have a problem, but if there is one, I know other means of feeding infants in addition to a wet nurse. If you think Ashford might be interested, I'm taking some of the carrier pigeons with me. We can train them to fly between Harrogate and Wystan. They are fast in any weather.”

The lady's eyes lit with delight. “Most excellent! He will be fascinated to learn a new means of harassing his family. Are you certain you will be staying in Harrogate?”

“I hope so,” Bridey said fervently. “The duke has promised to help acquire the land in any way he can. The property isn't too far from his Yorkshire estate, so surely he has some influence.”

She didn't know where she would go if she lost this opportunity, but she wouldn't worry about it just yet. She wanted to cling to the excitement of finally having the chance to achieve her dreams.



PASCOE NERVOUSLY WALKED the abbey grounds, studying the ivy-covered L-shaped manse. The place reeked of decades of neglect, but if architects had deemed it habitable, he wouldn't argue. Far too much rode on the unprepossessing stone structure. He poked at the long low cloister walls. The aging stone and medieval arches would make an excellent backdrop to a garden. He had no notion if they were solid enough to be rebuilt for comfort.

And he shouldn't be making plans yet—even though his heart pulsed through his veins, and he couldn't sit still.

He should have written Bridey. But he feared the narrow light of hope he saw ahead was no more than an ephemeral moonbeam.

His horse munched at a patch of greenery. The sun was almost hot as he listened for the squeak of coach wheels. He'd been kept informed of Bridey's itinerary, but it was impossible to know when she'd actually arrive, or who with. For all he knew, she'd been staying with the duke for days. He didn't know what he'd do if she arrived on Rainsford's arm.

He hated this emotional turmoil. He almost preferred his previous life of detachment, where he manipulated the futures of others to the detriment of his own. But that life had grown stagnant and confining.

He had new horizons, if he could only handle the most important negotiation of his life. This time, he had to temper his ambition with understanding, and be willing to concede. He prayed it wouldn't come to that.

Or he could kill Rainsford. That might be satisfying.

He heard the sound of a single horse—not a coach with driver and footmen. He breathed a sigh of relief at the same time as his temper rose at the fool woman's lack of caution. He marched down the overgrown lane to meet her.

"Pascoe!" Bridey cried as soon as he stepped into the road. "Pascoe, Pascoe!" She pulled her mount to a halt and practically flung herself into his arms.

Her excited kisses withered his temper. With lighter heart, he laughed, swung her in a circle, and carried her behind an overgrown rose hedge to hug her properly.

She clung to his neck, covered his face with kisses, then placed her hands on his chest and shoved him away. "What are you *doing* here? I thought you had an appointment with the king and had promised to look after Ashford's sons while he's in Wystan, and I believe Jack was expecting you to visit. Are you on your way north?"

"I have come to see you, of course." He shoved overlong hair out of his eyes, studied the stunning woman in his arms, then looked up and grimaced at the neglected manse. "I don't suppose there's a bed inside that's not a haven for vermin? I'd really rather make love to you before I explain more."

She laughed, took his hand, and led him toward the formidable three-story block stone hall. "We can see for ourselves what is inside. The duke gave me a key so I might see if the manse is sufficient for my purpose. He has promised to match any funds I raise to buy it, so I must go to London and meet Aster's friends and family. I am eager to finally see the city but worried sick about trying to talk wealthy ladies into contributing to my cause. Aster claims her family is quite excited. They seem to think a school for professional midwives and infant nurses is a good idea."

Pascoe listened to her nervous chatter with the patience of the diplomat he'd been, filtering the information she was offering in order to use it against her. Or for her. He was too anxious on his own part to be certain of either.

He followed her up the stone steps, noting they seemed solid. "Aster's herbalist cousin has promised to marry the first man who asks so she can inherit her grandfather's fortune. You have no idea what you have unleashed by offering to let her turn part of this dump into a lab for her experiments."

"I can't wait to meet Emilia and the rest of Aster's family." Bridey

twisted the key in the lock, but it stuck. “The duke says the abbey reverted to the Crown decades ago, but he has been acting as caretaker, that’s why he has a key. He claims the property currently costs more than it earns, so the Crown should be happy to take whatever we offer.”

Pascoe’s gut twisted as he realized how innocent she was of the layers of string-pulling happening behind her back. He would do anything to keep her innocent, but his life was contaminated by manipulation.

Hiding his guilt, he took the key, forced it through decades of rust, and felt the tumbler fall. “Perhaps it is a good thing that we don’t make love before we talk,” he said grimly, kicking the door open.

Bridey almost stumbled crossing the rotted threshold. Without thinking, Pascoe caught her up and carried her over, then continued holding her as they gazed in awe at the high-ceilinged entry.

“You had probably ought to set me down before you explain that remark,” she said dryly as he twirled in the beams of sunlight from the leaded glass panes above their heads.

He didn’t want to have to explain. He wanted the argument over and Bridey in his bed and to hell with the deceptive schemers who controlled their futures. But negotiation was what he did best, and he had to do this right. The question became—did he manipulate Bridey to his wishes or present his case and let her choose. The idea of losing if she chose against him was unacceptable.

Not wanting to release the heavenly scent and lush curves that was the woman he wanted more than air, he carried her into the front drawing room. Finding a window seat under the undraped floor-to-ceiling Gothic windows, he carried her over, kicked the wood to be certain no rats occupied it, then lowered her to the bench.

She rubbed her hand worriedly over his whiskered cheek. “I did not expect to see you here, but I meant to find you once we reached London. Perhaps I should speak my inappropriate piece first, while you ponder your difficult explanation.”

Swallowing his terror at her seriousness, Pascoe kissed her frown. “I have come prepared to wear you down with articulate diplomacy, so let us start with inappropriate, please. It sounds more interesting.”

She laughed nervously and clung to his hand. “I have decided that if I am brave enough to chase after a dream, I have to be brave enough to tell you how I feel, even if it means you’ll never write me another letter again. I’ve never been good at expressing feelings, possibly because no one was interested in listening.”

She hesitated, as if struggling for words. His heart swelled that this marvelous woman with such enormous compassion would choose to reveal it to him before any other. He kissed her hairline. “I am

interested, dear heart. I will always be interested in anything you say or do.”

She stroked his cheek, kissed him back, then pulled away to watch his expression. “I love you, Aaron Pascoe-Ives. I will always love you, no matter what the future holds. You’re a good man, a brilliant man, and I believe you will always choose the best path for all. Thank you for believing in me.”

Damn, the woman nearly brought him to tears. She’d buried the important part with flattery, but he heard her just fine. She *loved* him. His beautiful Viking *loved* him. Had anyone ever told him that? Lily, maybe, but so long ago he’d forgotten how it felt. He might explode with all those emotions that made it impossible to negotiate a deal.

He didn’t deserve her courageous declaration—one he had yet to make because he was too busy calculating the right moment.

Pascoe gathered her in his arms and squeezed her with joy. “I need to learn to be inappropriate, so I may convey my thoughts similarly. I am a man trained to be shrewd, not expressive. But if this heat burning in my heart, and this constant longing to be with you is *love*, then I love you more than I can ever say, even with all the words at my disposal.”

It was an enormous relief to cut open his heart and let it bleed, leaving him vulnerable. But his Bridey would never take advantage where another might, and he *trusted* her—as his jaded experience prevented him from trusting any other.

She cupped the back of his head and brought their lips together. Pascoe kissed her hard, longing to stay submerged in passion above all else. But he summoned his courage and set her away again. “I’m not certain the fates mean for us to be together, my love, but know I will always put you first, because I am no longer capable of doing otherwise.”

She stared at him in wonder and caressed his face. “Thank you for not letting me feel like a hysteric for being so bold, or making me feel as if I’m trying to trap you into an impossible situation.” She leaned her head against his shoulder and held him while the morning sun poured over them.

“There are times when your boldness terrifies me, but this is not one of those moments. You have actually made it easier for me to hunt words I’ve never said.” If he could just freeze this perfect moment, never move forward. . . But that wouldn’t accomplish what he wanted either.

Pascoe pressed a kiss to her sunset hair. She had discarded her hat, and she wore her thick tresses wrapped simply at her nape. In her riding attire, his Bridey was all supple curves, fitting neatly into his arms so they breathed as one. He might capture her love forever, if he

could phrase what he'd only just learned in the right way.

"You are not here to tell me there is something wrong with the children, are you?" she asked, pulling away and studying him anxiously.

He gave a dry laugh. "The imps from hell are fine as long as I take them everywhere. They're currently with Ashford's brats and their tutor at an inn down the road. By now, they have probably found ponies to follow me. They are irate that I let you go without saying farewell and are no longer speaking to me. There may be hope for them yet, if I can just say this next part in proper order. Your inappropriateness has thrown my planned speech all cock-a-hoop, and I'm hastily rewriting."

She sent him a teasing glance, even though the worry frown still creased her brow. "I am most sorry that I have been inappropriate. You may now use your silver tongue to express the difficulty you are facing."

One difficulty had been that he had not wanted her marrying him because she thought she had to for the good of all—as she had done the first time. Reassured by her declaration of love, Pascoe dropped to his knee on the dusty floor. "If it was just thee and me, and we could steer our lives in any way we chose, would you marry me?"

She stared at him in shock, and a tear rolled down her pale cheek. She hastily wiped at it. Pascoe didn't know if he should weep with her, so he swallowed hard and waited. Even when she cupped his face, he couldn't tell if this was her way of saying farewell.

"Please," he pleaded, "I need to know you would accept me over all others before I can say anything else."

"Yes, yes, of course I would, you foolish man. Who else would tolerate a managing witch who allows spirits into her head?" she asked with a hiccup, leaning over to kiss him. "I swore never to marry again, but you have made me see how limited my vision was. If I could choose anyone, it would be you. I mean it when I say I love you dearly, and that I live for your letters. I would hate it if you married anyone else, even though I know I can never be the domestic society wife you need."

Closing his eyes in relief, Pascoe returned to the seat beside her and dragged her back into his arms so she could not flee. Or punch him. "Then will you listen quietly and think long and hard about what I'm saying before you beat me into pulp and shove me through a window?"

She laughed, ran her hands under his coat, and kissed his jaw. "Perhaps we do need to have this conversation in bed."

"I would love nothing more, but I would not be coherent." He grasped her hands and pressed them between his while he studied her

laughing green eyes. His frost queen was happy.

He wanted her to always be happy. He dearly wanted to share her happiness. He prayed he was not about to kill all hope. "Let me say this in order, if I can with my heart pounding in my head. The duke may have the king's ear, but he cannot influence a king who is currently unhappy with me. In any case His Majesty always does as he pleases."

"His Majesty was unhappy with your work in Northbridge?" she asked indignantly. "I'll have Ashford—"

Pascoe touched a finger to her lips. "Ashford only confused the matter, so let me tell it my way. In his effort to find you land for a school, the duke mentioned to the king that the Crown owned this perfectly useless abbey that he would be happy to take off His Majesty's hands. At the same time that His Grace was pursuing your interests, I presented my report on Northbridge, along with the documents on Jack's parentage. His Majesty was *most* displeased."

Pascoe shook his head when ire lit her eyes. "I knew he would be. No one likes to cheat their godsons out of an inheritance or to be told they are fools. I was lucky not to be beheaded for telling him I allowed one to die under my watch. It's no matter. I handed in my resignation with my report. I realized that you were quite correct in saying that I needed to be home with my children more, that no nursemaid will understand them as I am trying to do. My father left me a competence. I earn an income from Ashford's estate as well. We will not starve, but I am as incapable as you are of going without occupation."

She squeezed his hands, and he saw hope in her eyes. Now that he knew how she felt, this next part came a little easier. "And this is where Ashford interfered. I asked him if he had any projects that might use my talents. And he demanded to know if His Majesty had rewarded me adequately for my service to the Crown over all these years, especially with the Northbridge episode. He seemed to think that my returning the mines and foundry to production while preventing gossip about Carstairs and his noxious brother should have *pleased* His Majesty."

"I have heard from Fin," she interrupted eagerly. "It is all working out very fine. Gilroy never wanted the title so much as the funds so he could keep his bride in style and flaunt about society in pretty clothes. Presented with proof of Jack's legitimacy, he willingly ceded the title and half the fortune to him rather than sue. Jack will go to school in the fall, Myers has found a competent steward who can act on Jack's behalf, and my brother is happily building a new foundry. *Everyone* is most pleased. Ashford is right. You *should* be rewarded."

Pascoe pressed his forehead to hers and her hands against his

chest. "Thank you for encouraging my arrogance, although I really am trying to rein it in. But it was Ashford pointing all this out to His Majesty and scolding him that brings me to this next part. My nephews are not shy about making their demands known, and they have rather influential voices. His Majesty grudgingly accepted Ashford's advice, but he has still had the last laugh."

She waited, wide-eyed. Pascoe took a deep breath. "Keeping in mind that I have barely lived in the home I have, and it has never been my ambition to own land. . . In his benevolence for services rendered, His Majesty has granted me a previously dormant baronetcy and the accompanying lands. I am now Sir Pascoe Ives of Alder Abbey."

"Of Alder Abbey?" she asked shakily. "*This* Alder Abbey?"

He nodded. "His Majesty knew nothing of what is between us, or why His Grace wanted the land. He just decided to reward me with what he considered a worthless title and piece of property and let me negotiate with the duke so he didn't have to."

She laughed a little, although her voice trembled. "So, I have to buy the abbey from *you*?"

CHAPTER 31

BRIDEY TRIED NOT to shake or cry until she fully understood what Pascoe was telling her. *He* owned the perfect land for the school *she* wanted to build? He had said if all else was fine, he would marry her, but the world was not perfect. No man would want the pariah she was about to become.

"I am happy for you, of course," she said, swallowing a lump. "You deserve the honor and recognition. I can only wish—" She tried not to express her confusion as she tried to pry her hands from his.

Pascoe released her hands, only to encompass her in his solid arms. She dug her fingers into his waistcoat and felt his monocle crush against her breasts where she'd hung it all those weeks ago.

"Hear me out, my love," he whispered against her ear. "I know you do not want to marry, that you wish to be in charge of your life. . ."

"To become a pariah to society," she added with bitterness. "No man, even you, will endure what will follow once I have my school. You can assure me all you like that Harrogate's physicians can be brought around, but I am perfectly aware that they will see me in gaol or burned at the stake as surely as my friends in the village once wished to do. I know I am unnatural and not a fit mother for your children or wife for a newly styled baronet. But *I will not change.*"

It had taken her years to accept her lot in life. She had tried to be wife and mother and had not succeeded. She was proud of what she had learned from her grandfather and on her own. If she could save lives, it no longer mattered if she was vilified for her unfeminine knowledge and conduct. She needed to learn more and pass it on to other women.

Pascoe wouldn't let her go when she struggled against him. "Everyone needs a little pariah in their lives," he said with laughter. "Stop fighting me, dear heart, and listen. *I am no longer in service to the Crown.* Do you have any idea how liberating that is? I can snub my nose at lack-wits and thatch-gallows and bumptious buzzards all I like. I need only please myself, and you, and my family. And possibly investors, since I have plans for investing in a railroad, but those won't be stiff rumps who will mind that my wife is a teacher of midwives."

She quit struggling and looked up at him in disbelief. "You cannot

mean that. Babies are not born on a convenient schedule. You will resent that I am not there to read stories to the children or entertain your investors over dinner or do all the things a wife should do.”

“Au contraire, my dear, but if that bothers you, I will help you find ways to be at home when you want to be, and to be delivering babes, if that’s what is needed. This is what I do, Bridey—I *solve problems*. A school needs an administrator and teachers. You cannot do everything yourself. Do not think small, my dear. If I add this useless land to your scheme, your fund-raising can be used for a great many other things, like raising walls to house teachers and student boarders.”

He was offering her the *abbey*? And marriage. She might have both?

She covered her mouth with her shaking hand and bit her finger to try to control the trembling. “I’ve never been able to think that big,” she whispered. “I’m not used to surprises, and this. . .” She gestured helplessly. “To have you and. . . They may want to put me in *gaol*. I have never met a man so willing. . . It is too much to consider.”

“I am trying to be open-minded, remember. I hope you consider me a nice surprise,” he said with a half-laugh, still looking astonishingly uncertain. He stood and dragged her to her feet. “And anyone wanting to take you away from me is asking for trouble. Come, while you ponder my offer, let us see if the place will even hold us. And the twins. And our various visiting families. Plus boarders, classrooms. . .”

Bridey clutched his hand as if it were her only tether to the ground. She could have *Pascoe*. He didn’t mind if she wasn’t a normal wife or mother.

Or mother. *Oh my dear word*, she had to tell him now. It had barely been two months, so she really couldn’t be positive, and she could still lose this precious life that might be growing inside her. But she had not been able to conceive since the miscarriage, so at least there was a modicum of hope. . . .

She had meant to wait a while longer to be certain. It was what she meant to tell him when she went to London. Riddled with her own fear and uncertainty and burgeoning hope, she ran to keep up with him as he crossed the enormous salon to a door in the far wall.

“This was once a medieval hall,” he was telling her in his parliamentary voice. “I’m guessing there will be a warren of rooms created around the perimeter, and that is why there are only front windows in here.”

“*Baronets* don’t sit in the Lords,” she said peevishly, not caring about halls and rooms as she grasped what the king had done to this brilliant diplomat. “You should be in the Lords. You know more about

this kingdom than any dozen country barons. Or earls."

"If I never see a government building again, I shall die happy," he said fervently. "Leave Ashford and Erran to beat their heads against stone walls. I want to see how the other half lives for a change. But I will never be a farmer," he warned. "I may never be wealthy. I will most likely always be selfish, so you would have to beat me with a stick every so often."

She swallowed hard, knowing he spoke the truth. "We are both difficult people, accustomed to having our own way," she admitted as he led her into a lovely corner room filled with light. Before she had time to admire it, he threw open a door into another small room. And another. All the way to the back of the house where they crossed into a large, window-filled dining hall.

"It is much like Wystan," she said in wonder. "They have just thrown up walls where they wanted a room."

"Your schoolrooms are down here, where knights must once have slept," he said, drawing her back toward the main stairs. "Let us see what awaits in the living quarters."

"This is an abbey, not a fortress like Wystan," she argued, hastening after him. "There are windows, not arrow slits and cattle byres."

"I prefer knights. You can have nuns and monks." He half-dragged her upstairs and toward the front of the family floor to gaze out upon the bedraggled grounds. "Parlor," he declared. He pointed at a far door. "Withdrawing room. I want bedchambers."

Bridey laughed at his impatience and tugged him in the other direction, feeling oddly buoyant despite the weighty decisions looming over them. "We have proven ourselves most expert in the matter of bedchambers, Sir Ives. Or it Sir Pascoe-Ives?"

He halted in a narrow corridor lined with solid, paneled doors. "I hadn't thought about it. I insisted on the Pascoe to differentiate me from the pack. How would you like to be styled, my lady? Should you accept my offer," he added hastily.

"You must consider Edward, as well as any future sons," she added, a trifle nervously while he stared down at her as if she held all the answers. "Will they wish to be part of the Ives *pack*, as you style it?"

"Will you mind having no title but lady after being a countess?" he asked. "You could be a marchioness if Rainsford has his way."

"What good has a title done me?" she asked with an edge of exasperation. "I need the freedom to do as I must, and Rainsford most certainly cannot provide that. I am not entirely convinced *you* can."

He flung open a door at the end of the hall and smiled in satisfaction at the interior. "I can do anything I like," he declared

boldly. "I am magic, just as you are. This room smells of love."

He grabbed her waist before she could see around him, lifted her from the floor, and flung her to a bed. Dust flew up from the bare mattress. Laughing, Bridey scrambled back up. "Convince me your magic has rid the place of vermin."

Shouts from outside warned they would not be left alone that long.

Pascoe cuddled her close, pressing kisses down her throat. "I do not smell vermin. Now that I know what love smells like, I can smell your love, Bridey. Tell me yes, you will be my wife, let me show you how I can make your life easier. None of us is ever completely free, but I can give you space to breathe."

Daringly, she opened her inner eye. No dark spirits lingered in this place, but most important, she saw what he was trying to tell her. The focused ambition of his red aura was now tempered with the loving pink light that had once hovered over him, and a pale gold of joy and inspiration bounced playfully in between. He was changing, opening himself to new perspectives, and he was *happy* about it.

While she kept her inner eye open, she covered his mouth with her hand and made those beautiful, long-lashed dark eyes look at her. "Wystan is magic," she said. "I warned you. I thought I would never conceive a child again. I was wrong."

A translucent green added another spectrum to his aura right before her eyes—the color of love and life. He radiated excitement and joy without a hint of the muddiness of doubt. And the pink that had hovered so anxiously separated from him.

"Are you telling me you're with child, *my* child? Can you know so soon? Please tell me yes. I want reason to drag you straight to the bishop because no child of mine will ever be called bastard." He tried to sound stern, but he couldn't hide from her eyes.

And that was how she knew what was between them was inevitable. Sir Pascoe-Ives could dissemble and manipulate and hide behind all the disguises he liked, but *she* would always see his true light. And maybe she could believe he had a gift that let him see, *or smell*, the real her, the woman who craved to love and be loved and feared she never would.

"Wystan is magic," she reminded him. "We created magic that first time, so you may find a bishop, if that is your desire," she said, embracing Pascoe's shoulders and standing on her toes to kiss his mouth before he began shouting. And when she'd silenced him, she added, "But I had best stay here to mind your children. Did you say they had ponies?"

"Ponies, yes." He looked stunned as she stood down. "I never thought to be a father again. Do you think this time I might learn to

do it right?"

"You are already doing better than most men I know." She threaded her fingers through his and led him back to the front room where they could watch the lane. "I can't believe you bought the twins ponies."

"It wasn't as if I had a choice. I took them to Iveston so I could be around to keep an eye on Ashford's brats while he was gone. There were ponies. The end." Holding her waist, he bent to cover her mouth again as laughter rang out from the children riding up the drive.

"Mama!" Bridey heard the once-silent Emma call. "Mama, look at us! We can ride. Edward says the ponies like us!"

She knew there were grooms riding with the twins, they weren't alone, but all she heard was their excitement. She really was going to be a mother after all. And all the rest. . . would happen a little at a time, with Pascoe by her side.

"Yes, I'll marry you," she whispered, in case he doubted it or himself. "I will be honored to be Lady Pascoe-Ives."

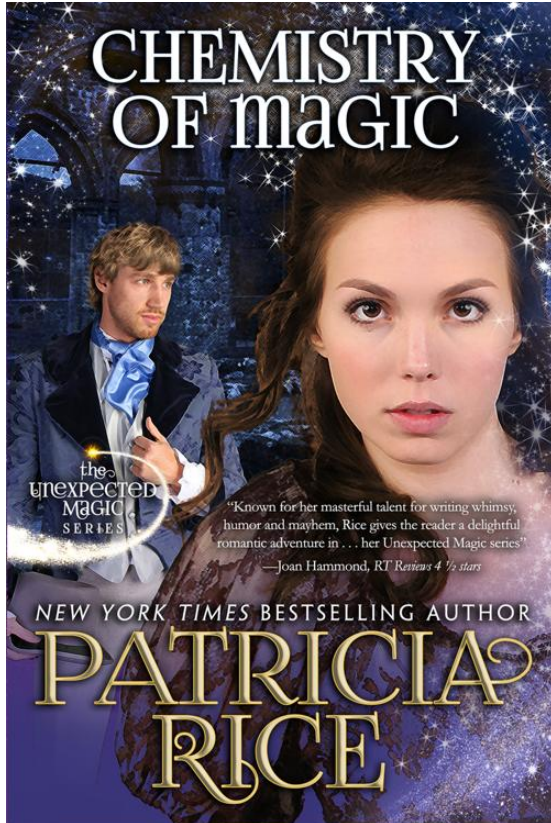
He kissed her, and his aura glowed with contentment. The pink that stretched so thin from him to the children glowed with satisfaction and faded into the heavens.



A DYING VISCOUNT, a bookish botanist, and the marriage of convenience that becomes. . . inconvenient. . . Try an excerpt of the next Unexpected Magic book:

CHEMISTRY OF MAGIC

Unexpected Magic Book Five



Copyright ©2017 Patricia Rice
First Publication Book View Cafe, 2017

To purchase *Chemistry of Magic*

CHEMISTRY OF MAGIC EXCERPT

“DOES LORD DARE normally generate the smell of sulfur?” Miss Emilia Malcolm McDowell inquired anxiously, holding a handkerchief to her nose as she traversed the back hall of that gentleman’s London home.

She’d occasionally heard family members refer to the viscount as Devil Dare, but she’d rather thought it referred to his bold and reckless approach to life, not the actual stench of Hell. Still, if he was as ill as her mother had said, one could make exceptions for odd odors. She, of all people, knew better than to be superstitious about peculiarities.

Lady Dare, the viscount’s widowed mother, bobbed her cap-covered graying curls. “He produces the most vile odors one can imagine. Perhaps I should not have insisted that he leave the window open even in winter,” she said worriedly. “London air can carry terrible diseases. Perhaps his illness is all my fault.”

“Then we would all be ill,” Emilia said, trying to reassure the lady while mentally re-evaluating her mission here. The viscount regularly generated the stench of sulfur and *other* vile odors? What kind of illness was that?

Before she could lose courage and flee, however, the lady shoved open a door without knocking. “Dare, you have a visitor.”

“Not now,” a deep male voice called impatiently from the interior. “And where is Jackson if you’re performing his duties?”

“I did not think it appropriate for a lady to visit without my presence,” the viscountess responded tartly, expressing the same impatience as her son. “Miss McDowell, I apologize for my son’s rudeness. He does know the niceties when he chooses to acknowledge them.”

“I’ve told you I don’t need any more ladies bringing me soup and patting me on the head,” he roared.

And then the room exploded. Glass shattered.

Emilia stepped in front of the much shorter, stouter Lady Dare, blocking her from the black, malodorous cloud billowing through the open door. She held her breath and ducked her head so that her wide-brimmed hat blocked the smoke from her face.

Voluble cursing from inside the chamber, combined with a hacking cough, led her to conclude the devil had only blown up the room, not himself. “My lord, are you injured?” she called, unwilling to

enter hell unless he could not escape on his own.

A large, blackened gentleman emerged from the baleful haze, brushing ash from his unbuttoned waistcoat and shirtsleeves.

She had been led to expect an *invalid*. She swallowed hard and again re-thought her purpose here. Lord Dare was so far from being an invalid as to resemble a veritable dragon—taller than she and twice as broad, larger than she remembered from her one brief introduction. Instead of dragon scales, however, he sported loose linen plastered with sweat and soot. Undisguised by gentlemanly attire, his powerful shoulders and solid chest created an illusion of virile health.

Only his hacking cough revealed the deteriorating state of his lungs—a dragon whose fire had died.

She recalled his hair as golden-brown, but she could not tell through the smoke. The apparition removed his spectacles to rub his eyes, leaving a ring of white around his singed dark lashes. Perhaps he did appear a trifle pale beneath the filth, she told herself. She was that desperate. And the sweat no doubt indicated fever since no actual fire emanated from his cave.

“Irritated, not injured,” he said, rudely looking her up and down. “No soup? No posies?”

“Dare, I swear. . .” The lady bit off her irritation. “Miss McDowell has a business proposition for you.” Her eagerness was obvious.

A few minutes ago, Emilia had been eager and anxious too. She’d waited years to tackle this task, studying the problem from every angle. She thought she’d finally found a perfect solution—

Faced with the devil, she was now back to *wary* and anxious. The frail invalid of her imagination was not quite the same as the querulous reality. Remembering all the sick people who counted on her, the future of pharmaceuticals, and the health of a kingdom—she drew a deep breath and met his cynical gaze without flinching. She had no other choices left.

“Lord Dare, perhaps this is a discussion we should have in private,” she suggested with as much hauteur as breathlessness could achieve. She wasn’t good at small talk, but she knew how to be direct.

“Do I know you?” Now that he’d stopped coughing, he cleaned his spectacles on the shirt tail he pulled from his trouser band.

Sympathizing with his mother’s irritation, Emilia refrained from rolling her eyes at this familiar refrain. It wasn’t as if her height rendered her invisible, but for whatever reason, men didn’t notice her, no matter how outrageously she dressed. “We met last year in Iveston, my lord, when you came to discuss glass for microscopes with Lord Theo.”

He frowned, dropped his spectacles in his waistcoat pocket, and without permission, grabbed her lovely wide-brimmed hat adorned

with lavender roses and removed it. She glared and snatched it back, just barely avoiding swatting him with it.

"The woman with the violet eyes," he exclaimed in pleasure, as if he actually remembered her. "Why the devil do you hide beneath that appalling flower garden? Come in, if you can bear the stench. I need to clean up before the soot settles. Mother, have Jackson bring the lady some tea." He held the door open wide to reveal the blackened ruins of a . . . study?

"Don't be improper, Dare," his mother scolded. "You must at least come into the sitting room where you can be chaperoned."

Wiping his face with his shirt tail, Lord Dare gazed upon his mother with a droll expression. "I think a dying man can be trusted to behave with all due respect for fear of what waits on the other side, don't you agree, Miss McDowell?"

She did not, but she'd been the one to suggest a private discussion. Lady Dare had some notion of her mission since she and Emilia's mother had discussed the problem of their recalcitrant offspring in advance. But Emilia preferred the terms of her proposal to be private.

"I think I can trust you to be a gentleman in your own home, under the same roof as your mother and sisters," she replied primly, avoiding the subject of what awaited on the other side of death. "Although I'm not at all certain that I can trust the room won't explode again."

"I've turned off the burners. You'll be safe." Lord Dare caught her elbow—he caught her elbow!—and dragged her inside the dimly lit chamber, closing the door on his mother.

He was fortunate she did not expire on the spot. The discomfort of his disease shot straight up her arm in pinpricks of warning.



"*WE WON'T BE SAFE*, not in this cesspool," the tall, be-flowered lady argued, rather dramatically wrenching her arm from Dare's hold and putting distance between them. "You cannot breathe properly in this soot. Where is the sitting room?" She looked about as if she might find a magic door.

"I'm covered in grime. I can't pollute the sitting room. Tell me your business and you needn't admire my décor for long." Dare grabbed cleaning rags from his desk drawer and began wiping down his glass beakers. At least, this time, he'd not set the draperies on fire, since there were none. He'd had the window boarded.

His damnable coughing started up again. He had no clean handkerchiefs left, so he used his shirt tail. Bad choice. When he came

up for air, the lady was looking at him with a glimmer of sympathy. *That* was the look he despised most. He wanted to prove to her that he wasn't exactly dead yet, except he'd more or less promised his mother to behave while they shared the same roof.

That he had sacrificed his private quarters and laboratory grated, but his remaining time in this world shouldn't be selfishly spent sending good money after bad.

"You must lie down," his guest said, blessedly not offering the usual weeping platitudes. "Your lungs and heart work harder when you stand. Lie down on that filthy piece of furniture over there and give your organs a rest." She pointed at the settee that had once been a silly bit of green silk when his mother had installed it a year ago, after the last fire.

Organs? The lady dared say *organs*? Impressed, Dare still ignored her admonitions and returned to polishing.

She returned the horrid hat to her lustrous black hair. "We will discuss nothing unless you exhibit a modicum of good sense. I cannot deal with a suicidal madman. I apologize if I've wasted your time and raised your mother's hopes."

"I need the glassware to be clean, and it won't be if I lie about admiring ceilings. You may speak or leave, it's no matter to me." Dare knew he was being abominably rude, but faced with the kind of woman he could no longer have, he'd rather she walked out than taunt him with his fate.

To his surprise, she took the beaker from his hand. "Do you keep vinegar or alcohol in here?"

His nose had almost lost its ability to smell, but she carried an air of . . . freshness. . . with her, as if the stench of his work didn't touch her. Out of curiosity, he located the bottle of clear alcohol and handed it to her.

"Go lie down. I will clean and we will talk."

Dare watched in fascination as the lady stripped off her gloves, expertly dipped a rag in a bowl of alcohol, and began vigorously polishing the glass as if she'd been doing it all her life. Those soft hands had most definitely not spent hours cleaning glass. They did, however, raise lewd notions of better uses for those slender fingers. In shock, he thought he needed a good lie-down. To his knowledge, ladies did not clean glass or even recognize the need for glass to be cleaned.

His reaction to her unusual beauty was far less surprising. The combination of gleaming black hair, brilliant purple eyes, and fair skin reminded him of a common flower he'd seen in the market—not glamorous but striking.

Coughing again, he did as told and crumpled onto the settee. In

truth, he needed to find breath for a discussion, and it was damned hard while breathing heavily down her delightfully long throat. Not that he was capable of breathing heavily any longer.

“That’s better,” she said in satisfaction, setting aside the sparkling beaker and picking up the difficult-to-clean, extremely expensive glass tubing.

Dare didn’t know if she referred to the glass or his position. He leaned against the pillows on the high end of the cushioned settee so he could watch her. She was tall for a woman, but the rest of her was disguised in sleeves wider than she seemed to be and skirts that belled out from her too-slender waist. “You can lose the hat. I can’t discuss business with someone whose face is concealed by all that flummery.”

She pinched the hat brim delicately between two fingers so as not to add filth to the lavender, removed it, then looked around for a safe place to set it down. There wasn’t any.

“Open a drawer. There’s nothing in them but supplies, but the interior stays clean.” Dare propped an arm behind his head and admired her graceful sway as she opened the begrimed desk and found a suitable resting place for her prized confection. Somehow, she did not strike him as a woman who cared about her attire, but she was garbed in what he recognized as the highest fashion. Living in a household of females, he was forced to notice such things.

She found his cleaning wires and cotton and began cleaning the tubing she’d left soaking in the alcohol. By damn, she knew what she was about. “Your proposition?” he asked, consumed with curiosity now.

It took a great deal to distract him from his goals these days, but this tantalizing female had managed it. Studying her, he decided her bosom probably wasn’t large, but it was high and firm above a waist so slender he could probably snap her in two. And those impossibly violet eyes. . . Where had she been when he’d been stupidly swaggering through the ballrooms of society?

Her fair brow drew down in a thoughtful line as she posed a response to his question. “My maternal great-grandfather left me a substantial estate. We had much in common, and he wished me to continue his work.”

“Which is?” Dare asked, because he was suddenly consumed with a desire to know everything about this woman of lavender mystery.

She hesitated, then said reluctantly, “Developing a truly accurate pharmacopeia.”

His interest immediately waned. “Female potions and witchery belong to the last century,” he said in dismissal. “Grass does not cure anything. Modern medicine requires experimentation and will surely encompass elements of which we know nothing yet.”

She looked down her nose at him. Perhaps her nose was a little long. And a bit sharp. Her lush lips thinned considerably with her disapprobation. And those bold black eyebrows formed jagged points of censure, which perversely thrilled him—perhaps because those huge purple eyes focused on him and him alone.

“Botany is a well-respected *science*. The women of my family were botanists long before the term was coined. Just because men have the freedom to explore other countries for new specimens does not make them better botanists than women,” she said coldly. “We have been using curative herbs and salves for centuries.”

Ignoring his snort of dismissal, she continued her lecture. “I am always interested in other cures, of course, and I most certainly experiment to determine the effectiveness of my formulas. . . unlike most apothecaries, I trust you realize. We are what we ingest, and if we ingest foreign chemicals, we cannot expect our bodies to do anything but reject them, often in a disastrous manner. That is not the point and is neither here nor there, however.”

“You are wrong about the effectiveness of chemicals,” Dare argued. “My physician prescribes Fowler’s Solution, a chemical mixture that has *cured* disease, including malaria and asthma.” And syphilis, but Dare refrained from shocking the lady with his sordid research. “It’s still in the experimental stage for consumption, but otherwise, I believe its effectiveness has been proven.”

She heaved a sigh of exasperation and picked up the next piece of glass to be cleaned. “I did not come here to argue over medicine. This is a *business* proposition. I have been reliably informed that your family will be thrown from their home upon your demise, a situation which you seem unwilling to rectify.”

Dare closed his aching eyes and rubbed his pounding temple. *This* was the reason he’d given up his private quarters—to save money. “My funds are all invested. They will pay off eventually, but they are not liquid enough yet to buy houses. I regret that, but short of finding a cure for consumption, I don’t see how you can help. Perhaps you could shoot my heir?” he asked hopefully, with an element of sarcasm, to be sure.

“An interesting solution,” she retorted in the same tone. “I suppose the lawyers could then consume your estate searching for a new heir. My solution might be a trifle archaic, but more apt to succeed for both of us. You see, my great-grandfather was an old-fashioned sort of gentleman. He believed women should be married. So I cannot take charge of my inheritance until I am wedded.”

Dare pried open one eye. She seemed serious. She frowned as she polished a graduated cylinder. She wasn’t even looking at him. He ought to be insulted. Most women flattered, flirted, and fawned all

over him. Instead, he was fascinated by her lack of feminine wile, reflecting the perversity of his mind, he fully acknowledged.

A maid rapped at the door, and the lady called for her to enter. Once the tea tray was settled, the maid scampered out. Dare watched as Miss McDowell poured tea in the genteel manner instilled in all ladies of quality. She was everything society expected her to be. . . but unless the disease had eaten his brains, he was quite certain she was not at all what she seemed.

She offered the cup to him, and Dare shook his head. He'd have to sit up to drink, and he thought his head might roll off his shoulders if he tried. Despite what the poets said, there wasn't a damned thing romantic about this damnable disease. The body he'd taken for granted for thirty-one years was deteriorating faster with each passing day.

"How sizable is your great-grandfather's estate?" he asked after she'd sipped her tea, because his brain wasn't completely gone yet, and he thought he knew where this *discussion* was headed.

She almost stopped his heart when her wide lips curled upward and her lustrous-lashed eyes sparkled in approval.

"Grandfather's estate is large enough to purchase the townhouse your family will need when your heir evicts them. Large enough to establish the laboratory I need for my experiments. And the house and land pay for themselves," she said in satisfaction.

"Laboratory?" A bout of coughing prevented finishing the question.

He didn't realize she'd approached until he felt her hands on his chest, pushing him back down into the confounded hard settee. Coughing too hard to object, Dare tried to concentrate on a woman's hands on him for the first time in forever. They felt good. They felt more than good. It was as if she were pushing warmth into his lungs, forcing them to open up. He almost choked taking a deeper breath than he'd been able to take in months.

She hastily backed away and stared at her now-filthy hands as if they were as diseased as he was. Her voice was a little shaky but did not reflect distaste. "Does your physician use one of those new stethoscopes?" she asked, returning to his table to clean off the soot. "The damage seems worse on one side than the other."

What the devil did that mean? And since when did ladies lay hands on gentlemen to whom they were not related?

He used a dirty rag to wipe his mouth, wadding up the bloody stain and flinging the rag under the chair. Now that he was breathing again, his coughing settled. "Yes, he uses a stethoscope, for what good it does. Consumption damages lungs. We don't need to cut open my chest to know that."

Although he had to wonder how she knew without use of the equipment, but he was focused on a more important topic. "You were speaking of a laboratory?" He tentatively drew another breath. The pain was less. Perhaps having a beautiful woman caressing him drew his blood downward and relieved the pressure.

Suddenly looking brittle enough to break, she focused her attention on polishing glass. "Yes, if I am to help the ill, I need a laboratory to test and perfect my medicines, understand how and why they work," she said in a voice that sounded as if she tried to convince herself.

"Now that my pharmacopeia is almost finished," she continued, gaining momentum, "my need for a true laboratory is the reason I'm eager to finally claim my inheritance. A distant cousin of mine has just married. Her new husband owns an old abbey near Harrogate where she means to establish a school for midwives. There are buildings on the grounds suitable for an infirmary, and she wants to establish her own clinic for dispensing her *potions*." Her tone mocked his earlier scorn. "She said there is enough room for me to establish a laboratory if I'm willing to aid her in preparing and dispensing medicines."

Dare pushed himself into a sitting position. Had she been a snake oil dispenser, he would have scorned her herbal quackery. But playing with botany had once been an acceptable lady's pastime. She didn't seem intent on poisoning him with it. Yet. "Harrogate?" he asked warily.

"Yes," she said, setting the expensive glass down with care. "I know nothing of mineral waters, but your mother indicated they were of interest to you. That is one of the reasons I am here."

"I've been attempting to separate the various minerals in spa water, looking for the curative properties," he admitted. "Harrogate's waters are particularly potent."

He hadn't forgotten the earlier part of her speech, and he continued with caution. "Once you marry, you will inherit an estate near Harrogate and this abbey?"

She nodded. Her velvet-lashed, purple eyes got wider, if that was at all possible.

Despite all her exterior composure, she was nervous, Dare realized. He was a huge brute, lying here like a bull in a field. She was a delicate lady, with a very odd mind, but that didn't change the fact that she was a gently bred female and should not be here at all.

Which was when his lust-weakened brain comprehended the whole—*she knew he was dying*. She had come to him with a *proposition*. She needed a husband. He needed funds. But her courage had failed at the sticking point. He almost fell off the chair in his haste to show he wasn't a complete dunderhead.

Dare regained his feet, set aside the glass she was cleaning, and took her ungloved hand. Her bones were little more than twigs.

She hastily snatched her hand back, which made his next gesture awkward. Cautiously leaning on the table, because his strength frequently failed him these days, he got down on one knee.

“Miss McDowell, would you do me the delight and pleasure of becoming my wife?”

She burst into tears and sobbed, “Yes, of course, please.”

And then she grabbed her gloves and began pulling them back on.

We hope you have enjoyed this sample of

Chemistry of Magic by Patricia Rice

To purchase: *Chemistry of Magic*

GET A FREE PATRICIA RICE BOOK

THANK you for reading *Aura of Magic*.

If you enjoy my humor and Regency England, you can download *Wicked Wyckerly*, one of my Regency historicals for free. Just **click here**



I AM AN INDEPENDENT AUTHOR, so getting the word out about my book is vital to its success. If you liked this book, please consider telling your friends, and writing a review at the store where you purchased it. Reviews help other readers find books. I appreciate all reviews, whether positive or negative.



IF YOU ENJOYED THIS STORY, try these PATRICIA RICE books!

The World of Magic:

The Unexpected Magic Series

MAGIC IN THE STARS

WHISPER OF MAGIC

THEORY OF MAGIC

The Magical Malcolms Series

MERELY MAGIC

MUST BE MAGIC

THE TROUBLE WITH MAGIC

THIS MAGIC MOMENT

MUCH ADO ABOUT MAGIC

MAGIC MAN

The California Malcolms Series

THE LURE OF SONG AND MAGIC

TROUBLE WITH AIR AND MAGIC

THE RISK OF LOVE AND MAGIC

Historical Romance:

The Rebellious Sons

WICKED WYCKERLY

DEVILISH MONTAGUE

NOTORIOUS ATHERTON
FORMIDABLE LORD QUENTIN
Rogues & Desperadoes

LORD ROGUE
MOONLIGHT AND MEMORIES
SHELTER FROM THE STORM

WAYWARD ANGEL
DENIM AND LACE
CHEYENNE'S LADY
The Regency Nobles Series

THE GENUINE ARTICLE
THE MARQUESS
ENGLISH HEIRESS
IRISH DUCHESS

Mysteries:
Family Genius Series

EVIL GENIUS
UNDERCOVER GENIUS
CYBER GENIUS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

WITH SEVERAL MILLION books in print and *New York Times* and *USA Today's* bestseller lists under her belt, former CPA Patricia Rice is one of romance's hottest authors. Her emotionally-charged contemporary and historical romances have won numerous awards, including the *RT Book Reviews* Reviewers Choice and Career Achievement Awards. Her books have been honored as Romance Writers of America RITA® finalists in the historical, regency and contemporary categories.

A firm believer in happily-ever-after, Patricia Rice is married to her high school sweetheart and has two children. A native of Kentucky and New York, a past resident of North Carolina and Missouri, she currently resides in Southern California, and now does accounting only for herself. She is a member of Romance Writers of America, the Authors Guild, and Novelists, Inc.

For further information, visit Patricia's network:

<http://www.patriciarice.com>

<http://www.facebook.com/OfficialPatriciaRice>

https://twitter.com/Patricia_Rice

http://wordwenches.typepad.com/word_wenches/

<http://patricia-rice.tumblr.com/>

ABOUT BOOK VIEW CAFÉ

BOOK VIEW CAFÉ is a professional authors' cooperative offering DRM-free ebooks in multiple formats to readers around the world. With authors in a variety of genres including fantasy, romance, mystery, and science fiction, Book View Café has something for everyone.

Book View Café is good for readers because you can enjoy high-quality DRM-free ebooks from your favorite authors at a reasonable price.

Book View Café is good for writers because 95% of the profits goes directly to the book's author.

Book View Café authors include NY Times bestsellers and notable book authors (Madeleine Robins, Patricia Rice, Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff, and Sarah Zettel), Nebula and Hugo Award winners (Ursula K. Le Guin, Vonda N. McIntyre, Linda Nagata), and a Rita award nominee (Patricia Rice).



Table of Contents

[Author's Note](#)

[Get A Free Patricia Rice Book](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chemistry of Magic](#)

[Chemistry of Magic EXCERPT](#)

[Get A Free Patricia Rice Book](#)

[About the Author](#)

[About Book View Café](#)